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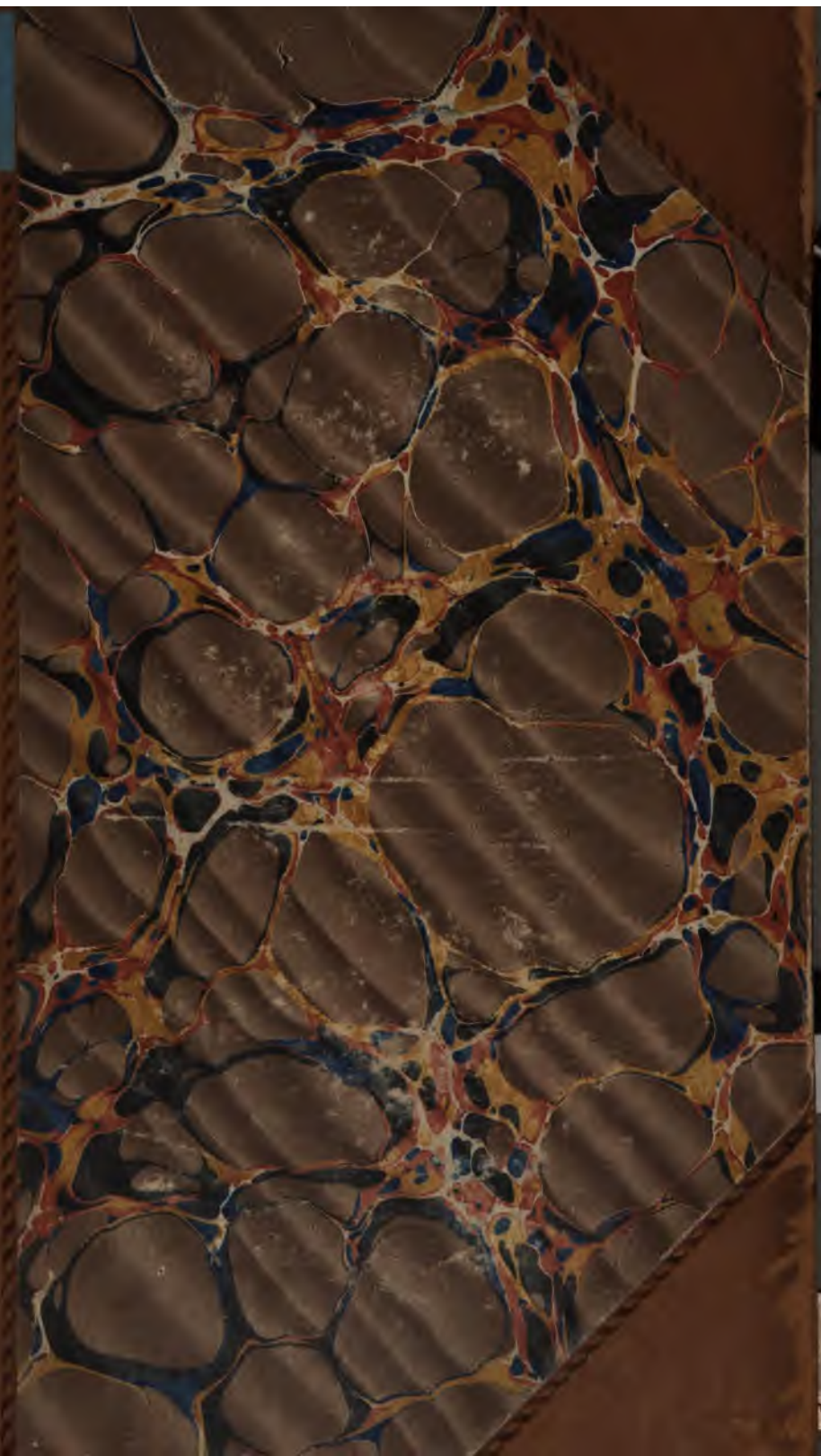
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**HISTORICAL SKETCH OF**  
**ENGLISH PROSE LITERATURE.**



FOR OUT OF THE OLDE FELDES, AS MEN SAIETH,  
COMETH ALL THIS NEWE CORNE FRO YERE TO YERE;  
AND OUT OF OLDE BOKES, IN GODE FAIETH,  
COMETH ALL THIS NEWE SCIENCE THAT MEN LIUE.

D. A. TALBOYS, PRINTER, OXFORD.

HISTORICAL SKETCH  
OF THE ORIGIN OF  
ENGLISH PROSE LITERATURE,  
AND OF ITS PROGRESS TILL THE REIGN OF  
JAMES THE FIRST.

*W. Gray. M.D. Coll*

OXFORD,  
FOR D. A. TALBOYS, HIGH-STREET.

MDCCCXXVIII.

728.



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HISTORICAL  
SKETCH OF THE ORIGIN  
OF ENGLISH PROSE LITERATURE,  
AND OF ITS PROGRESS TILL THE REIGN OF  
JAMES THE FIRST.

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IT is by far the most pleasing, if it be not the most exciting province of history, to trace the ameliorating progress of learning and the arts; and whilst we look back from the lofty vantage-ground of knowledge and refinement, on the undefined and clouded obscurity of barbarism and ignorance, to mark, with a philosophic eye, the certain yet often whimsical and capricious causes which contributed to the gradual developement of intellect, and the improvement of manners.

The learning of Britain was indebted for its origin to the speculative priests of a heathenish mythology. Without examining into the precise attainments of the druids and the bards, or investigating the obscure sources from which they are conjectured to have derived the curious and methodical system of

knowledge which they possessed, it is enough to remark, that it proved sufficient to enthrall the unlettered minds of their countrymen, and to excite a spirit of lively and singularly penetrating enquiry.

The results of their disquisitions were communicated in verse—a species of narrative which possessed decided advantages in an age when the art of writing was not a popular accomplishment; since it at once assisted the memory, and captivated the fancy. About twenty thousand verses are alleged to have comprehended the whole circle of the sciences forming a druidical course of education; and twenty long years were usually spent in committing these instructive couplets to memory. It has even been asserted, that the youths were taught to repeat and to sing the statute laws of their country—a subject surely by no means the most inviting to the “linked sweetness” of harmony.

We are also told, that they applied assiduously to the study of rhetoric, and had made considerable advances towards the acquirement of oratory. They even gave public instructions in this persuasive science, and enumerated among their deities “one who was named Ogmios, which, in their language, signifies the power of eloquence.” He was the object of universal esteem and of fervent adoration, and was, it seems, characteristically painted by his votaries, as an aged man, “sur-

rounded by a great multitude of people, with slender chains reaching from his tongue to their ears."

The fluctuating circumstances of a barbarous people afford abundant opportunities for the display of extemporaneous harangue. By its varied agency and irresistible enchantment, their fiercest passions can either be subdued during peace, or their courage stimulated and inflamed in the hour of peril and combat.

But notwithstanding the admitted and manifold acquirements of the ancient Britons, it has been confidently questioned, whether they ever possessed the simple knowledge of letters. And, though we have some ground to suppose that a few were initiated in this useful art, and may even have derived a faint glimmering of Athenian literature from the Greek colony at Marseilles, perhaps we may both prudently and safely concede, that to the Roman invasion they were principally indebted for these amongst other eminent advantages of civilization. Certainly no vestiges of the works attributed to their writers remain; and the circumstantial biographies of Leland and Bale have been pronounced to be fabulous and improbable legends.

The Romans, whilst they expelled or destroyed the druids, introduced the study of their own polished language, and the elegant models of composition and thought in which their literature abounded. A natural distaste

was at first exhibited alike for the persons and the intrusive learning of the conquerors ; but the latter was afterwards received by the rude natives with wondering interest, and perused with a degree of ardour and conspicuous advantage, which attracted the flattering approbation of their accomplished patron, Agricola. The Latin and Greek tongues, accordingly, became the approved vehicles of instruction, and prepared them to experience the humanizing influence of the christian dispensation ; which, whether enthusiastically embraced or cautiously repudiated, would equally awaken their research and stimulate their reason and intellectual energies. When in addition to this we consider that the object of their enquiries was now clearly defined, and their efforts to reach it plainly and luminously directed, by the principles of philosophizing developed by Aristotle and Cicero, it can scarcely be doubted, that a gratifying harvest of home-bred literature was reaped, though the chances of war, and the destructive agency of time, have consigned the memories and the productions of most of their authors to oblivion. The names, however, of St. Ninian, St. Patrick, Pelagius, and Celestius, have been enrolled in the pages of authentic history as distinguished ornaments of their age : and two seminaries of education, which had been established near the river Wye, could at times boast, while under the charge of Dubricius, an accomplished bishop,

of possessing as many as a thousand students.

The abandonment of the island on the part of the Romans, rendered necessary by the rapidly approaching dissolution of their unwieldy empire; and the harassing incursions of the Scots, the Picts, and the Saxons, extinguished for a season the valued lamp of learning, which had just begun to burn so brightly, and restored the unhappy darkness and imbecility of ignorance. And as it had been the uniform policy of their recent masters to enerve and effeminate the several states which they subjugated, that they might create an implicit dependance on their auxiliary protection, and a consequent disinclination to throw off their yoke, the Saxons, who next made a hostile descent upon the island, found the spiritless natives an easy prey.

These fierce and restless marauders, whose warlike virtues had never been mellowed by the operation of science, brought back confusion and intellectual obscurity in their train. Most of the educated Britons withdrew to the more peaceful retirements of other lands; and but a few remained to nurse the feeble spark of learning, at the head of whom Gildas the historian has been placed. He was complimented by his countrymen with the flattering appellation of "the wise;" and is the only British author of the sixth century whose works have been preserved. "His History of Britain,"



says Henry, "is a very short jejune performance, only valuable for its antiquity, and from our total want of better information."

But christianity again interposed its benignant influence; and the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons in the succeeding century was attended with the most beneficial effects to the neglected interests of literature. It led to a communication with Rome, still the empress of European knowledge, and to the establishment and application of the readiest means of instruction. Laws were reduced to writing; academies once more founded; and fame anxiously solicited and accorded to mental improvement. Such, indeed, was now the individual thirst for information, and so inadequate the means of gratifying it, that king Aldfred gave Benedict Biscop, founder of the monastery of Weremouth in Northumberland, "an estate of eight hides;" or, in other words, "as much land as eight ploughs could labour," for a single volume on cosmography. Arithmetic, astronomy, music, logic, rhetoric, geometry, and grammar, were severally studied and expounded with various success: and the school of Canterbury, amongst others, sent forth a band of prelates who subsequently filled with honor the highest offices in the church. The reputation of Aldhelm spread even to distant nations; and the venerable Bede, about a century later, when a proficiency in church music was considered the very acme of erudition on

the continent, shone forth as the brightest luminary of the western world. His works were so diversified and so comprehensive, that they have been affirmed to contain all the learning then known, and to be solely depreciated by a credulity inseparable from the age in which he lived. And his lamented decease, followed as it was by the harassing devastations of a new and numerous tribe of invaders, the Danes, gave another withering check to the budding interests of literature.

The beginning of the ninth century was, accordingly, marked by the almost total eclipse of knowledge, and by the ascendancy of a profound and nearly universal ignorance. The disturbed state of the times led to the erasure of the monasteries—to the consequent destruction of the libraries attached to them—and to the death or entire dispersion of the erudite monks. Alcuinus, one of their number, gives the following affecting picture of their melancholy situation, in a letter to Offa king of Mercia. “I think it much better,” he says, “to remain where I am,” (in the abbey of St. Martin at Tours,) “than venture myself in a country where no man can enjoy security, or prosecute his studies. For, lo! their churches are demolished by the pagans, their altars polluted with impiety, their monasteries defiled with adulteries, and the land wet with the blood of its nobles and princes.” And we have the concurrent testimony of king Alfred for stating,

that at his accession to the throne, A. D. 871, "there were very few to the south of the Humber who understood the common prayers of the church, or were capable of translating a single sentence of Latin into English; but to the south of the Thames," he adds, "I cannot recollect so much as one who could do this."

Johannes Scotus Erigena, alleged to have been a native of Ayr in Scotland, was the solitary individual who enlivened the gloom of this ill-fated period. "In philosophy," says Brucker, "he had no superior, and in languages no equal in the age in which he lived." He was universally admired as the subtle father of scholastic divinity; and his metaphysical acuteness was withal agreeably diversified by his lively humour and facetious pleasantries.

The brilliant though chequered reign of the immortal Alfred speedily dispersed the thick mists of gross ignorance and error, which mantled and deformed the face of the literary horizon. He allured the most celebrated scholars from foreign realms; and legally compelled the more substantial among his subjects to benefit their children by the advantageous tuition thus placed within their reach. Preferment was only conceded to superior proficiency in scientific accomplishments; and the noble and the wealthy soon sought to conciliate his favour by facilitating the advancement of education, and emulating his un-

stinted generosity towards its deserving professors. At the same time, he not only employed competent individuals to make Saxon translations from the most useful and improving treatises contained in other tongues, but also sedulously occupied his own pen in the same salutary labour, as well as in original productions, replete with instructive wisdom, and written, we are told, "with elegance and a playful amenity." While he rivalled the redoubted Charlemagne in martial prowess and romantic achievements, he spoke Latin with the graceful fluency and propriety of a Roman, had cultivated Grecian literature with remarkable assiduity and success; and added to his reputation as an orator, a philosopher, and a historian, the fame of being the most fortunate suitor of the Saxon muse.

He crowned the glory of his intellectual era by the foundation and endowment of the university of Oxford, which still, amid many blemishes, attributable to the contented indolence of functionaries and the deranging hand of time, throws a halo around the memory of its illustrious projector.

Muratori, the able and ingenious historian of Italian literature, has thus highly complimented this comparatively Augustan age. "Nor should praise," he remarks, "be withheld from Britain, Scotland, and Ireland, which at this time, in the career of letters, surpassed the other realms of the west; and that chiefly by

the labour of the monks, who, while learning elsewhere lay languid and depressed, vigorously encouraged and upheld its cause. That in Gaul the pursuits of science were revived, and schools opened, was owing to the Saxon Alcuin; and Italy confessed her obligations to him and to his countrymen."

But even this promising dawn was ere long overcast on the death of the great magician who had called it into existence, and had illuminated it by his beneficent and enterprising genius. The Danes renewed the ravages which the terror of his arms had interrupted; and his successor Edward, though by no means destitute of acquirements, was unfortunately devoid of the reforming energy, and the studious zeal of his father. Barbarism, and contempt of learning, therefore, soon ruled the ascendant; and the exercise of genius was, to a certain extent, proscribed by superstitious ignorance. Still, however, literature at this epoch was rather despised and depressed than altogether annihilated; and the reigning monarch paid a marked tribute to its excellence by emulating his revered parent in the foundation of Cambridge; and by bestowing, what was then considered as a finished education on the various members of his family.

Accordingly the accomplishments of his son Athelstan, who inherited the throne, have been the subject of elaborate and almost suspicious panegyric. He was undoubtedly a warm pa-

tron and encourager of talent; and he issued a decree, by which he elevated a priest, in full orders, to a level, in respect of honours and civil privileges, with a thane. He could not well have held out a stronger incentive to literary exertion; and perhaps, after all, the comparative dulness of his times, may be more justly attributed to the inert stolidity of the people, than to any lukewarmness or inefficiency on the part of the sovereign.

The genius of St. Dunstan, indeed, has been mentioned by his monkish contemporaries and biographers as sufficient to redeem the unlettered character of his age; but his acquirements seem deserving of as little credit and consideration as his perilous encounters with the arch-enemy of mankind, and the numerous surprising experiences and adventures of his life.

On the death of king Edgar, in 975, England once more became the victim of its inveterate Danish persecutors, who levelled the infant institutions of Oxford and Cambridge with the dust—the former in the year 1009, and the latter in the year following; and, for a season, left peaceful learning no inviolate haunt where she might securely enjoy and dispense her treasures. But she luckily found, at this crisis, an asylum among the nations of the east, whence she returned to her adopted soil in happier times, and, under more favourable auspices, adorned and enriched by the assiduity of her oriental entertainers.

Yet it must not be forgotten, to the disparagement of the Danes, that when, in the early part of the eleventh century, their temporal supremacy was fairly acknowledged, and the Saxons had submitted themselves quietly to their yoke ; the aspect of affairs, under Canute the great, began to assume a more favourable and gratifying appearance. He set himself to repair the devastations which his countrymen had wrought, and restored the plundered privileges and revenues of Oxford. This liberality, however, was little respected or imitated by his rapacious son Harold, who has covered his memory with infamy by retracting the concessions of his father, and barbarously “spoiling and dishonouring” that ill-fated seat of learning.

Happily the career of destruction was somewhat checked in its progress by the accession of Edward the confessor, one of the superseded line of kings, A. D. 1041 ; who, if he did nothing better, at least made atonement and compensation for the flagrant atrocities of his predecessor. More could not reasonably have been expected from one of his weak and simple character : and his beneficence was not frustrated by Harold the second, in whom terminated the ancient Anglo-Saxon dynasty.

Up to this period of our history, and, as we shall see, during a considerable time afterwards, a distinct national prose literature can scarcely be said to have had an existence. For though the popular strains of the bards were embodied

in their native Saxon, which latterly was neither deficient in dignity nor in harmonious sweetness, the graver learning of the times was commonly transmitted to posterity, secured by the more classic perpetuity which the Latin language afforded.

Indeed written prose compositions, in the primitive stages of society, invariably imply an eminent advance in civilization, and in intellectual refinement; since, before they can claim for themselves a separate and independent consideration, the loose and periphrastic expressions which early poetry tolerates, must have improved into a more determinate and apposite diction, and the harsh and elliptical character peculiar to barbarous dialects, must have expanded into a narrative and copious felicity.

The Saxon had ascended regularly through the gradations of song, ballad, and metrical romance, and attained a degree of excellence which might have ensured a continued duration in its original form, had not its onward progress been suddenly diverted by its powerful Norman rival. It could already boast of possessing a near approach to the epic in the ancient poem of *Beowulf*, and a curious paraphrase of the scriptural history of the world by *Cædmon*, from which, it has been insinuated, that *Milton* drew the first conception of his *Paradise Lost*.

*Bede*, who is said by his pupil *Cuthbert* to have been intimately conversant with his mo-



ther tongue, employed himself in translating St. John's gospel into Saxon; to which were subsequently appended the Psalter, and other portions of sacred writ; and Alfred farther enriched it by versions of the histories of Orosius and Bede, some of the works of Boethius, and the Liber Pastoralis of pope Gregory. If to these we add a few miscellaneous treatises and unimportant chronicles, we shall nearly have exhausted the entire prose compositions of this not uninquisitive and truly interesting people.

But sufficient was done in constructing and cultivating the language to supply the substantial groundwork of our modern English, which lies under the deepest obligations to its venerable precursor for no inconsiderable enhancement of its expressiveness and power. The extent of our obligations may be most precisely illustrated by the following specimens from the works of a few of the popular authors in different eras of our literature; for the ready-made selection of which, and for the distinguishing italics that mark the words whose derivation is undoubtedly Saxon, we are indebted to the elaborate volumes of Mr. Sharon Turner.

The first is from Shakespeare.

*To be or not to be, that is the question;  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The stings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them? \* \**

The next is from a beautiful poem of Cowley's.

*Mark that swift arrow, how it cuts the air !  
How it outruns the following eye !  
Use all persuasions now, and try  
If thou canst call it back, or stay it there.  
That way it went ; but thou shalt find  
No track is left behind.*

The third is from the classic and elegant Addison.

*I was yesterday, about sunset, walking in the open fields, till the night insensibly fell upon me. I at first amused myself with all the richness and variety of colours which appeared in the western parts of heaven. In proportion as they faded away and went out, several stars and planets appeared, one after another, till the whole firmament was in a glow.*

The fourth is from the correct and idiomatic Swift.

*Wisdom is a fox, who, after long hunting, will at last cost you the pains to dig out. 'Tis a cheese, which by how much the richer has the thicker, the homelier, and the coarser coat ; and whereof, to a judicious palate, the maggots are the best. 'Tis a sack posset, wherein the deeper you go you will find it the sweeter.*

The last is from the sonorous and latinized Johnson.

*Of genius, that power which constitutes a poet ; that quality without which judgment is cold, and knowledge is inert ; that energy which collects, combines, amplifies, and animates ; the superiority must, with some hesitation, be allowed to Dryden. It is not to be inferred that of this poetical vigour Pope had only a little, because Dryden had more ; for every other writer*

*since Milton must give place to Pope: and even of Dryden it must be said, that if he has brighter paragraphs, he has not better poems.*

The reader may perhaps be amused by comparing what has preceded, with the subsequent short extract, in the original Saxon, from king Alfred's minute account of the voyage of Ohthere towards the northern pole.

Ohthere sæde his hlaforde Ælfrede Kynincge thæt he ealra northmanna north mest bude. He cwæth thæt he bude on thæm lande northweardum withth a west sæ. He sæde theah thæt thæt land sy swythe lang north thanon ac hit is eall weste buton on feawum stowum; sticce mælum wiciath Finnas; on Runtathe on wintra, and on sumera on fiscothe be thære sæ.

The literal translation of these few sentences runs thus.

Othere said to his lord, king Ælfred, that he abode the northmost of all the northmen. He declared, that he abode on those lands northward against the west sea. He said, that that land is very long to the north, and is all waste, except in few places; the Finnas dwell scattered about; they hunt in winter and in summer they fish in the sea.

By the Norman conquest the progress of the English language was considerably retarded. William himself, we are told by his secretary, abhorred its sound, and commanded all the laws to be promulgated, and the legal proceedings to be conducted in his vernacular French: "and even the children at school," he continues, "were taught the first elements of

grammar and letters in that tongue, and not in English," as formerly. The consequences of this proscription were such as might naturally have been expected. That irregular progenitor of the French, called the *lingua Romana*, became the medium of official and of fashionable intercourse ; whilst the Anglo-Saxon was degraded to the baser purposes of the churl, and to the crude and illiterate exertions of the "myrth of minstrelsy and losels tales."

The Latin, however, still continued to be the consecrated vehicle of religion and of learning ; and it is to this very circumstance, and to the extensive prevalence of scholastic ignorance amongst the laity, that we are mainly indebted for our easy emancipation, at an after period, from the foreign trammels of the French. But, be that as it may, the Latin works of this era were both numerous and respectable ; and the terseness and elegance of the style in which they were generally composed, have been the theme of much discriminating and judicious panegyric. They principally treated of the art of rhetoric, and of the study of Aristotle's logic, the subtle jargon of which had captivated their yet dazzled imaginations, and entangled and confused their minds amid the solemn trifling which it created.

The philosophical speculations of the time partook of the same unsubstantial and declamatory character ; and the invaluable products of sound reflection and natural feeling were often

sacrificed to the voluble and fantastic "grace of words." Neglecting or despising the wisdom that was placed within their reach, and rendered obvious to their perceptions, they perversely sought to investigate abstract principles beyond the limited range of human reason, and which could never recompense them with the slightest portion of advantageous instruction. The result, as might have been anticipated, was unsatisfactory and deceptive, and consisted of an ill-assorted and motley combination of preposterous falsehood and idle allegory. The sagacious John of Salisbury, a contemporary author, has well described these unprofitable and contentious enquirers. "They run about the streets," he observes, "they frequent the schools, they start a thousand frivolous and perplexing questions, and confound both themselves and others by a deluge of words."

A more deserving subject of research was very fortunately presented to them in the civil law of the Romans, which now began to attract the studious attention of the continental seminaries; and having been revived in England through their influence, after a long season of oblivion, was honoured with regular lecture-ships and crowded audiences at Oxford. It at first encountered violent and jealous hostility from the common lawyers of the time; but the enlightened spirit of its provisions soon enabled it to triumph over the illiberal enmity of its contemptible and bigoted opponents.

On the whole, though our language sustained a temporary eclipse, and though the pursuits of the learned were deteriorated by a serious alloy of folly and of misdirected ingenuity, the entire circle of our literature was deeply and permanently indebted to the opportune arrival of the Normans. They not only renovated the spirit of studious enterprise, which was beginning to languish among the Saxon hierarchy, but disclosed, at the same time, an unbroken and extended field for the effective exertion of intellect. "A torpefying spell," says Mr. Turner, "was taken off from the human mind ; and if the first schoolmen only used their new liberties in extravagance and insolence, they were soon followed by better thinkers, who combined knowledge with reasoning, and, by a wise moderation, made the freedom they assumed, valuable to themselves and useful to the world."

The Conqueror, combining extensive accomplishments with a munificent disposition, had excited a genius for enquiry in his hereditary dominions, which was soon engrafted upon the people who became the subjects of his arms. He amply endowed monasteries and other religious establishments for the better encouragement of learning, and for the reception of the illustrious literati who had attended him into Britain. Books were multiplied and diffused by their laborious exertions, in a manner hitherto unprecedented ; and it was a proverb in

common use, and one of gratifying import, that a "convent without a library, is like a castle without an armoury." He, in fine, bestowed so much attention upon the intellectual culture of his family, that his son Henry the first was afterwards distinguished and honoured by the well-deserved appellation of *le Beau-clerc*, or the learned.

From a successor so accomplished, (not to mention his brother William Rufus,) literature could not do otherwise than derive important benefit; and we find, therefore, that during his own, and the five subsequent reigns, it continued to flourish in uninterrupted and increasing prosperity. Among its most conspicuous ornaments are enumerated and eulogized, Ingulphus, the ingenious abbot of Croyland, Lanfranc and Anselm, consecutive archbishops of Canterbury, Nicholas Breakspear, who was elected to the popedom by the title of Adrian the fourth, William of Malmsbury, Roger Hoveden, and the philosophic John of Salisbury. The universities, and the cathedral and conventual schools, were elevated by their patronage and prelections to a wide-spread renown; and though the first received several checks from the uncertain politics of the times—from civic dissensions, and on account of private broils—they seldom desisted from their exertions towards the cultivation of letters, and soon recovered from the distractions to which they had been temporarily subjected.

The passion for acquiring knowledge, which was then exhibited by the uninitiated, may be appreciated from the subjoined anecdote recorded by Peter of Blois, in his continuation of *Ingulphus*.

“Joffrid, abbot of Croyland, A. D. 1109, sent to his manor of Cottenham, near Cambridge, Master Gislebert, his fellow-monk, and professor of theology, with three other monks who had followed him into England; who being very well instructed in philosophical theorems, and other ancient sciences, went every day to Cambridge; and having hired a certain public barn, taught the sciences openly, and in a little time collected a great concourse of scholars. For in the very second year after their arrival, the number of their scholars from the town and country increased so much, that there was no house, barn, nor church, capable of containing them. For this reason they separated into different parts of the town, and imitating the plan of Orleans, brother Odo, a famous grammarian and satirist of those times, read grammar, according to the doctrine of Priscian, and Remigius upon him, early in the morning. At one o'clock brother Terricus, an acute sophist, read Aristotle's *Logics*, according to the introductions and commentaries of Porphyry and Averrois, to those who were farther advanced. At three, Brother William read lectures on Tully's *Rhetoric* and Quintillian's *Institutions*. But Master Gislebert, being ignorant of the



English, but being very expert in the Latin and French languages, preached in the several churches to the people on Sundays and holidays."

Such were the simple yet promising advances that marked the commencement of this new era of knowledge, which was fostered in its beginnings, and facilitated in its progress, by many fortunate coincidences and powerful stimulants. Not the slightest of these must be reckoned the recent influence of the crusades, by which the established refinement and treasured wisdom of the east became generally diffused among the emulous literati of Europe, and served to enlarge their conceptions and to cultivate their tastes, whilst their enthusiasm was beneficially and irresistibly aroused.

It was not, however, for somewhat more than three centuries after the conquest that the English language began to be reassumed as a constituent part of education, and to be explained and construed in the different seminaries, to the exclusion of the Norman. We have the authority of Trevisa, a writer of the fourteenth century, for imputing this important and arduous revolution to "John Cornwaile, a master of grammar," and to a certain Richard Pincriche and others, his associates and pupils: and he gives as the precise date of the fulfilment of their laudable enterprise, "the yere of our Lorde a thousand three hundred and four-score and five, and of the second king Richard, nine."

The itinerant minstrels and professional glee-men, aided by the illiterate blindness of the uneducated multitude, had prevented the native language from ever falling into utter desuetude, and circumscribed the exotic dialects and treatises of the learned within the limited precincts of the monasteries and schools. Their efforts, though as little indebted to poetic invention as to fancy, rose as high as the popular feeling could either appreciate or demand; and their diversified narratives of

“Pomp, and feast, and revelry,  
With masque, and antique pageantry,”

were not more welcome to the hearth of the yeoman and the humbler cottage of the peasant, than to the maiden's bower and the baron's princely hall. Thus they at once diffused a taste for the homely charms of vernacular minstrelsy, and excited a zealous imitation on the part of those more erudite spirits, who had hitherto been endeavouring, with rather indifferent success, to rival the easy elegance and vigorous majesty of the classics. It was then discovered to them that their native language, with occasional assistance from the Norman, was neither unsusceptible of improvement nor destitute of tempting capabilities; and that originality would amply atone for its solely youthful imperfections; for its inherent deficiencies of expression, and uncultivated asperities of phrase. Metrical histories and chronicles were soon followed by more regular

and legitimate attempts ; and a fixed line of demarcation was subsequently drawn and established between the valuable appanage of prose, and the nearly boundless dominions of rhythmical fiction.

Some little discrepancy, however, has originated as to the exact epoch to be assigned for the formation of our modern English. Mr. Ellis wishes to place it between the years 1180 and 1216, while Mr. Campbell severely chides him for his affected precision, and seems to consider that it was probably later, and much more gradual, in its construction. The determination of the question has long ceased to be practicable, and was never commensurate with the trouble of a very contentious dispute. It is quite sufficient for us to know that the native language finally prevailed, and that it despoiled its antagonist of whatever could confirm its innate vigour, and adorn and lend facility to its expressiveness and flow.


The influence, accordingly, which was ultimately deduced from the conquest has been happily compared to “that of a great inundation, which at first buries the face of the landscape under its waters, but which, at last subsiding, leaves behind it the elements of new beauty and fertility.” It may be added, that, like the Nile, it bestowed luxuriance and productiveness on a territory which might perhaps otherwise have languished in hopeless barrenness and neglect.

At all events, the thirteenth and fourteenth

centuries presented decisive appearances of marked literary improvement, and future mental regeneration. If the Latin language ceased to be cultivated with the assiduity of former times, the omission was amply compensated by the gratifying circumstance, that the English was beginning to be preferred in the service of literary composition, no less than in the social intercourse of conversation, and the graver transactions of business. It must be confessed, nevertheless, with the deep regret which it merits, that our philosophy was still debased by verbose trifling and contention : and logic not unfrequently called in the assistance of the cudgel and the rapier when its moods and figures were found deficient in producing argumentative conviction. The intellects of mankind, in short, seemed to be totally dazzled and blinded by the overpowering excess of light which was too simultaneously poured upon them ; and they groped about for a season amid the “ blear illusions ” of school dialectics, and the puzzling subtleties of theology, for the means of strengthening their faculties and increasing their knowledge.

Meantime individuals were not wanting at once to pursue the right course themselves, and to explain its seeming intricacies and peculiarities to others. Among the very elite of these worthies must be placed the ingenious Friar Bacon, the father, and assiduous promoter, of experimental philosophy. After having been

educated at Oxford, and accomplished by foreign travel, he settled in his native country, imbued with an ardour for scientific research, and an intuitive perception of the readiest means of attaining the cherished object of his devotion, which could neither be perverted by the dominant foibles of the age, nor diminished by the malicious calumnies and persecutions of jealous and ignorant contemporaries. He was eminently skilful in geography and astronomy, possessed an intimate acquaintance with the chemical properties of bodies, made considerable advances in the then degraded science of medicine; and, if he did not actually discover, closely approximated to the invention of telescopes, and the composition of gunpowder. "It is still more remarkable," says Henry, "that Bacon laboured with great earnestness (in his *Opus Majus*) to prove, that a much greater proportion of our terraqueous globe was dry land, and habitable, especially in the southern hemisphere, than was commonly believed; and that he endeavoured to prove this by the very same arguments which determined Columbus, two centuries after, to go in quest of the new world." He, moreover, testified, with becoming indignation, against the artificial and hair-splitting absurdities of the prevailing eloquence of the pulpit, and warmly inculcated the propriety of employing an arrangement, and a manner, suited to the solemn dignity of the subject and the place, and calculated to elevate the hearts



of the hearers to whatever was excellent and praiseworthy, by the chastened purity of its style, and the simple grandeur of its sentiments. In short, if his example and precepts had been followed to the extent which they richly merited, sound learning would soon have expelled her spurious counterfeit from the empire, which the latter had usurped, and most unworthily misguided. But, unfortunately, he had so completely outstripped the laggard spirit of his time, that it derived a benefit merely trifling from the serviceable wisdom which he revealed, while the full harvest of advantage was reserved for the less prejudiced generations that succeeded.

The favourite studies of this period were the philosophy of Aristotle, and the canon and civil laws. The former had found translators into Latin, and illustrators in Britain, in the persons of William Fleming, Alured English, and the renowned sir Michael Scot of Balwearie; none of them, if we may credit Bacon, very competent for the task, since Fleming, according to his assertion, was thoroughly guiltless of a knowledge of Greek, and Scot had plagiarized his entire publication from "one Andrew a jew." Perhaps he might have alleged, with equal felicity and truth, that the whole commentaries of the age were directly borrowed from the Arabians, who had early embraced and propagated the metaphysical doctrines of the Stagyrte with intense enthusiasm and diligence, and

had poured out upon them the unwearied voluminousness of oriental ingenuity. Indeed to such an infatuated extent did their zeal carry these industrious pagans, that Farabi, one of their savans, who wrote sixty books upon the rhetoric, declared, he had read over the treatise two hundred times, and yet was no less desirous of perusing it again. This anecdote may afford us a tolerably definite conception of the inordinate fervour with which these treasures of antiquity were appreciated, and of the engrossing influence which they were likely to exercise over the literary pursuits of the learned.

The acquisition and practice of the laws, on the other hand, were mainly patronised and exercised by members of the clerical body, on account of the lucrative employment and ecclesiastic promotion to which they conducted : and so effectually did these allurements ultimately attract the attention of scholars to legal occupations, that philosophy and general literature were for a time abandoned to willing oblivion. We find it mentioned in Warton, that, "in the year 1268, the inceptors in civil law at Oxford were so numerous, and attended by such a number of guests, that the academical houses or hostels were not sufficient for their accommodation ; and the company filled not only these, but even the refectory, cloisters, and many apartments of Oseney abbey, near the suburbs of Oxford." It was, accordingly, considered both expedient and needful, that the

mercenary industry of students should be formally recalled to the neglected acquirements of philosophy; and a bull was in consequence issued by pope Innocent the fourth, which commanded that no advocate, or professor of laws, should enjoy any preeminence on that account alone; or be advanced to any ecclesiastical dignity or benefice, unless he were also competently skilled in other acknowledged sciences. We may presume that this considerate and timeous injunction of the pontiff, was not without a salutary influence, as far as its provisions extended; and it is only to be regretted, that it did not proceed to denounce the still more fallacious studies of alchemy, chiromancy, and judicial astrology, in which much meditation, and mental energy, were then too often vainly consumed.

But other causes tended to accomplish what authoritative interference might rather have contributed to retard. Three singularly illustrious personages flourished about this epoch, to whom the English language, and our literature generally, lie under the most memorable obligations: we allude to John Wickliffe, Robert Langlande, and Geoffrey Chaucer.

The first was educated, and subsequently raised to the headship of Canterbury hall, and the professor's chair of divinity, in the university of Oxford,—situations that invested the doctrinal novelties which he soon sought to disseminate among the people, with the grave



The stimulus and direction which were thus accorded to the speculations and sentiments of the nation, stamped an instantaneous and permanent impression on its intellectual character and literary habitudes. A similar effect had been produced on the continent, at a much earlier period, by the multiplied dissensions and misunderstandings with which the Greek and Latin churches were violently agitated and divided. Now, as on that occasion, abilities were summoned into action which might otherwise have lain dormant; and the frequent excitements to polemical composition which occurred, substituted elegance and vivacity, instead of poverty and rudeness of style; and whetted into poignancy that keenness and address inseparable from argumentative and religious conflict. "The dawn of human improvement," therefore, as it has been exquisitely remarked, "smiled on the fabric which it was ultimately to destroy, as the morning sun gilds and beautifies those masses of frost-work, which are to melt before its noon-day heat."

It is closely interwoven with the scope of our brief essay to notice, that in the assault on the monkish orders, which was now fearlessly carried on, the vehemence and energy of the preacher, and prose writer, were ably assisted and strengthened, by the pungent virulence and

\* This unique gem is extracted from Mr. T. Campbell's Essay on English Poetry, one of the most captivating productions to be met with, either in our own, or in any other language.

bitterness of poetic irony and ridicule. The Anacreon of the eleventh century, honest Walter de Mapes, had already entertained his numerous readers, and boon companions, with the piquant sarcasms against his order, by which his festive productions were enlivened. But Robert Langlande, who at the present crisis, under the fictitious name of Piers Plowman, assumed the same delicate and inexhaustible subject, as he advanced to the combat armed with deadlier weapons, so he wielded them with a decision of purpose still more relentless and effective. Being himself a secular priest, and of course intimately conversant with the besetting infirmities of his profession, he visited the immoral corruptions and superstitious observances of the clergy with a raciness of wit, and a spirited dexterity of humour, that lost nothing of their severity from the ingenious cloak of allegory which he found it convenient to assume. It is sincerely to be regretted, however, that he thought proper to affect the, in his time, obsolete style of the Anglo-Saxon bards, rather than avail himself, as far as he might, of the recent improvements with which the new language of England had been liberally accommodated; and that he even preferred the imitation of the alliterative metre to the more modern and polished adornment of "fine tinkling rhyme and flowand verse." Yet these circumstances may lead us to infer, with some decent countenance from probability, that the Anglo-

Saxon was still supported by an extensive use among the commons, to whose taste and understanding his works were principally adapted. But, independent of any deduction to which his services on this account must be exposed, he assisted powerfully to emancipate the popular intellect from its thralldom; and, with the solitary exception perhaps of Robert de Brunne, was the very first of his countrymen to combine an intimate knowledge of human action, with the more striking appendages of poetic invention and reproof.

His peculiar manner may be conceived from the following vivid picture of covetousness, which has been justly pronounced by Warton "to be drawn in the true colours of satirical painting."

And thanne cam Covetise, kan I him nat discrive,  
 So hungerly and hollowe, so sternely he lok'd:  
 He was bittle-browed and barbur-lipped bothe;  
 With two blerid eiyen as a blynde hagge,  
 And as a letherne pors lollid his chekes,  
 Well syder than his chynne thei cheverid for elde:  
 And as a Bond-man of his bacon his berd was bydrivelid;  
 With an hood on his hede, and a lowsy hatte above.  
 And in a tawnie tabard, of twelve winter age,  
 Alto toryn and baudy, [dirty,] and full of lyce crepyng;  
 But yf that a louse could have lopen the bettre,  
 She had not walkid on the welte, so was it thredbar.

It may be worth while also, before dismissing him, to extract a singular prediction that he uttered, and which received a more punctual fulfilment from the reforming energies of Henry

the eighth, than it has often been the lot of unscriptural prophecies to obtain.

And ther shall come a king, and confesse you, Religiouſ,  
And bete you as the bible telleth, for breking of your rule:  
And amende moniales, monkes and chanoines.  
And then friers in their freytor shall fynd a key  
Of Constantynes coffers, in which is the catal  
That Gregories godchyl dren had it dispended. [for ever,  
And thanne shall the abbot of Abingdon, and all his issue  
Have a knocke of a king, and incurable the wound<sup>d</sup>.

<sup>d</sup> That the curious reader may have an easy opportunity of comparing the advance which had been made, in point of style, within the last century and a half, I subjoin a short extract from the historical poem of Layamon, a writer placed by Mr. Ellis in the year 1180, and by Mr. Turner postponed till about the year 1200.

## LAYAMON.

ARTHUR lai alle longe night  
And spac with theſe geonge cniht,  
Swa naver nillde:  
Ne him sugge  
Soth hu hit ferde.  
Tha hit was dai a margen,  
And dugethe gon sturien.  
Arthur tha up aras,  
And strehte his armes.

## TRANSLATION.

ARTHUR lay all the long night,  
And speech with that young knight  
So never would he have:  
Nor say to him  
Truly how it went.  
Then it was day in the morning  
And the nobles began to stir.  
Arthur rose up,  
And stretched his arms.

The following description of an eclipse, from the Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester, is conjectured to have been composed about the year 1280, whilst the quotation from Langlande in the text may be assigned to somewhere between the years 1347 and 1355.

As in the north-west a derk wedder ther aros  
Sodeinliche svart inou that mani man agros  
And overcaste it thoghte all that lond that me mighte unnethe ise.  
Grisloker wedder than it was, ne mighte an erthe be.  
And vewe dropes of reine ther velle grete inou.  
This tokninge vel in this lond, tho me this men slou,  
Vor thretti mile thanne.—This I sei Roberd  
That verst this boc made and was wel sore aferd.

Robert de Brunne might aptly illustrate the intermediate space between Robert of Gloucester and Langlande; and for liberal quotations from his manuscript compositions, we refer to Mr. Turner's History of England during the Middle Ages, vol. ii. p. 446, etc. 4to.

The venerable Chaucer imperishably perpetuated, by his surpassing genius and execution, what Langlande has thus cleverly and satisfactorily begun. His obligations to his predecessor, however, were neither few nor unimportant. He had evidently studied his writings with considerable attention and advantage; and he has even been accused of appropriating the well-known *nom de guerre*, and of composing a sequel to the "Vision," under the title of a "Crede." But in the higher attributes which distinguish the chosen favourites of the Muses, in animated richness of fancy, creative magnificence of narrative, and in that happy character of mind which can blend the feeling with the comic, and the simple pathos of nature with the imposing splendour of art, the author of the *Canterbury Tales* stands forth incomparably superior to all who had preceded him, and to nearly the whole of the most distinguished who have flourished in song since his time. He boldly arraigned the vices, and exposed the follies, of his contemporaries; yet with a satire so engaging, that it must have amused whilst it reformed, and which, abstaining from mere personality, and the passing ridicules of the day, sought its root in human nature, and in the distinctive principles of social action. He is peculiarly and *κατ' ἐξοχὴν* the favoured poet of the heart—the accurate describer of those intricate energies and sympathies by which the "bosom's lord" is stirred into activity to detect

the valuable or the ludicrous ; or melted almost by stealth into the sensibilities of affection, and beguiled away by the eccentricities and extravagancies of love. He ever supplies a graphic representation of passions, persons, and habits ; and, as Dryden has correctly observed, we see before us as distinctly the several pilgrims in his famous progress—their “different educations, their humours, and their callings”—as if we had long been admitted to their familiar intercourse and friendship, and “had supped with them at the Tabard in Southwark” just before their setting out.

His stories were commonly borrowed from Boccaccio and the Italian novelists, as the latter derived them, in their turn, from those exquisite fictions of the east, which, besides delineating the striking manners and picturesque customs of the orientals, in a style at once of faithful and of ornamented description, have contributed equally to the delight of our juvenile fancies, and to the more fastidious gratification of our maturer years. They opened up, at their first introduction, a new and fertile career to the enterprise of European genius and invention, which they not only directed but stimulated into an active competition ; and thence the rich treasures of Italian romance had their origin, which were afterwards polished by Boccaccio into captivating beauty, and amplified and rendered immortal by the strains of Chaucer and Shakespeare.

To Chaucer, however, the greater merit must unquestionably redound, since both his difficulties were more numerous, and his means of removing them more limited and imperfect. Born about the year 1328, or, in the opinion of some biographers, nearer 1340, and possessed of an abundant and a precocious capacity, he seems early to have conceived the patriotic design of redeeming his native language from its existing blemishes and impurities, and at the same time confirming it in the possession of those excellencies with which it had already been endowed and extended by others. His first considerable poem, the *Court of Love*, appears to have been written in English at the premature age of eighteen, when he was yet a student or clerk of Cambridge; and he gives us reason to imagine, that even this had been preceded by many a "balade and rondil in honour of the kyng and quene of love." It is truly astonishing that he should have discovered at this youthful period the permanence and favour which the employment of his native dialect would ultimately confer upon his works, and the difficult mystery of attuning the rude mechanism of our versification. "Alone," says his eloquent biographer Mr. Godwin, "in the silence of his juvenile studies, surrounded with monks and friars and schoolmen, hearing no accents but those of ultramarine French, and an uncouth and disputatious Latin, his memory dwelt with fondness upon the dialogue of youth-

ful frolic or of domestic tenderness, and he conceived the generous and daring project of breathing poetry into a tongue, hitherto little familiarized with the luxuriances of fancy, and which the polite and the learned were eager to treat with contumelious disdain. \* \* \* With Chaucer it seemed to spring like Minerva from the head of Jove, at once accoutred and complete."

Yet, distinguished as he was, he is by no means obnoxious to the anomaly of faultless excellence. Sometimes he was vulgar, and not unfrequently obscure—now inclined to luxuriate in gratuitous digression, and perchance indulging his reader with a dull lecture on predestination, when he, in straight-forward simplicity, is prepared to anticipate an effusion of amatory earnestness and regard. But such topics we shall leave to the ingenious critics who have animadverted upon his verses, and proceed to observe, that our author has also bequeathed to us certain treatises in prose.

His first attempt in this way was a translation of the discourse of Boethius de Consolatione Philosophiæ, a book at one time so extremely popular in this island, that no less than six separate translations of it were made before the end of the seventeenth century—one of them into Saxon, by the indefatigable king Alfred; a second, by Chaucer, into the now predominant dialect; a third, by John Walton, called the Chapelain, printed in 1525; a fourth,



by John Lidgate, printed in 1554; a fifth, by George Colville, or Coldewell, in 1556; and a sixth, by lord viscount Preston, in 1695\*. Of these, the performance of our poet was by no means the best. It bears numerous traces of juvenility and of classical inaccuracy; but, nevertheless, he seems to have been deeply impressed with the comprehensive learning of his original, and to have become enamoured of the frame-work in which it is transmitted to posterity.

He, accordingly, afterwards executed an imitation in the Testament of Love, which is considerably his longest and most elaborate work in prose. Like the similar treatise of his prototype, who was also a state prisoner, it was the occupation and solace of a protracted confinement in the Tower, resulting out of his connection with the supposed political intrigues of the celebrated John of Gaunt, and his London partisans. But it is immensely inferior to the composition of Boethius, as well from the more impenetrable obscurity of its allusions, as from the greater general inelegance of its style and execution, and the less elevated character of the sentiments which it expresses. Still, however, it is a production replete with energy and interest, exhibiting the indications of a fancy which even captivity could not ex-

\* Dr. Watt, in his *Bibliotheca Britannica*, has enumerated altogether fifty-seven different editions and translations of this popular work in the ancient and modern languages.

tinguish, though occasionally bedimmed by the querulousness incident to penury and restraint. He frequently laments his fallen fortunes with melancholy elegance and pathos, and recurs with hopeless regret to the blighted enjoyments of his youth. "Although I hadde lyttell," he observes, "in respecte [comparison] amonge other grete and worthy, I hadde a faire parcel, as me thought for the tyme, in forthering of my sustenance. I hadde richesse sufficiently to wave nede; I hadde dignité to be revered in worship. Power me thought that I hadde to kepe fro min enemies; and me semed to shine in glory of renome. \* \* \* \*. Every of tho joyes is turned into his contrary: for richesse, now have I povertie; for dignité, now am I emprisoned; in stede of power wretchednesse I suffre; and, for glory of renome, I am now despised and foulliche [foully] hated."

The astronomical dissertation entitled *Conclusions of the Astrolabe*, appears to have been written at no long interval after the *Testament of Love*, and was compiled by our poet for the special instruction of his youngest son "littel Lowys." But it is in no other respect valuable than as exhibiting an amiable instance of paternal solicitude, which itself alone could induce an intellect like his to descend from the imposing reveries of imagination, and the engrossing business of life, to the comparatively repugnant and surely irksome task of simplifying the ru-

diments of knowledge for the opening capacity of a child.

His only other remaining prose works are the stories of *Melibee*, and the *Good Person*, in the *Canterbury Tales*;—the first being a literal translation of a French fable bearing a similar title, and both containing nothing to enliven the monotonous dulness of their moral precepts, or to raise them to the level of the inspired episodes by which they are surrounded and relieved. They fully warrant us, in truth, in visiting them with a careless neglect; and we are now the less reluctant to avail ourselves of the privilege thus offered, conscious that we have already adverted, however imperfectly, to most of the prominent characteristics which have lent a brilliancy to the memory of the patriarch of our literature.

Though considerably before his appearance, as Mr. Tyrwhitt has justly stated, and as we have had occasion to observe, the English language had clearly begun to preponderate in the scale, yet the balance still hung in a state of wavering suspense, and might long have continued dubious, had it not been for the prompt exertions of our bard and his compeers. And the former is considered by Mr. Ellis as peculiarly distinguished from all others by having been the first to introduce “an exuberance of ornament, and an affectation of Latinity” in the derivation of words, thoroughly divested of pedantic and of studied obscurity, which are no-

where to be encountered in the writings of his predecessors; and which constituted him the father of that more ornate and sonorous manner fondly esteemed by his followers as the very acme of elegance in diction, and described by them as embellished with a gorgeous display of the "golden dewdrops" of eloquence and fancy. At the same time he treated with pointed ridicule the mere classical imitations, and the French performances, of his countrymen; and strenuously inculcated the propriety of clothing popular subjects in the guise which should at once be most familiar and easily manageable to the writer, and which should contribute to render his effusions most readily understood. "Let then Clerkes endyten in Latin," he says, "for they have the propertye of science and the knowinge in that facultye; and let Frenchmen in theyr Frenche also endyte theyr queynt termes, for it is kindly to theyr mouthes; and let us shewe our fantasyes in such wordes as we lerneden of our dames tonge." His own works, accordingly, have been truly described as the "well of English undefiled"—whence the stream has rolled down to posterity, as from a copious fountain, receiving the tributary offerings of lesser rills in its course, and diffusing fertility and beauty whithersoever it meandered.

The name of the "moral Gower" is so inseparably connected with the achievements of his great associate Chaucer, and their merits and services are so consentaneous in point of

character, though very different in degree, that the former must not be depreciated by a silent negligence of his deserts. Indeed Gower had the advantage of priority in the cultivation of the muses; but, as his first works were conceived either in the Latin or the French, he was posterior to Chaucer in the employment of his native idiom. He followed emulously, however, the example which was at length set him by his illustrious friend, and in the end became an eminent and assiduous coadjutor in adding to the stores and ornamenting the style of the English tongue. Nay, it has even been contended that the conception of the *Canterbury Tales* was borrowed from the plan of the *Confessio Amantis*, the principal effort of the pen of Gower, and his earliest tribute to the dialect of his father-land; and there is nothing either unlikely or derogatory in this supposition, which, without depreciating the genius and the exertions of the one, adds to the laurels of the other, and to his claims on our attention. Certainly the “*Man of Lawes Tale*” was purloined with little change from the publication of Dan Gower, though it has been shrewdly suspected that he was himself indebted for the invention to some more ancient legend: and the story of the “*Wife of Bath*” is probably in a similar predicament. Gower did not, however, exalt what he appropriated with the same vividness of fancy, and singular felicity of execution which uniformly distinguish the compositions of his

more wonderful rival. He was, on the contrary, sorely afflicted with an inveterate tendency to languid minuteness in his narratives, and with a perverse spirit of fatiguing and of inapplicable digression. But he did much to promote the practical morality of the nation, and to allure them into the pursuit of philosophy, and of sound ethical enquiries. Displaying the loveliness of virtue with the ornate earnestness of a poet, and the contemplative philanthropy of a sage, he strove sedulously to eradicate the weeds both of thought and of language; and, as Leland has expressed it with even more embellishment than his wont, considered "it worth his while to apply a diligent culture, that thus the rude herbs being extirpated, the soft violet and the purple narcissus might grow instead of the thistle and thorns."

It might seem forgetful and negligent should we here omit to notice the famous John Barbour, archdeacon of Aberdeen, the author of a metrical biography in twenty books, commemorating the lineage and the mighty acts of the Scottish Bruce: and, did our memoir pertain directly to the poets of the land, there are few who would attract a worthier share of our encomium than this deserving Caledonian. His style possesses a finish which Chaucer himself has scarcely equalled; his versification is rendered conspicuous by its eminent fluency and correctness; and an elevated tone of sentiment gives a modern leaven to his song, which one is

scarcely prepared to expect at a stage of history so very early. This is in no part more conspicuous than in his celebrated tribute to liberty, which we trust will never be absent from the affectionate remembrance of his countrymen; and may they invariably exclaim with the discreet and regulated enthusiasm that inspired the high-souled old prelate—

Ah! freedom is a noble thing!  
 Freedom makes man to have liking!  
 Freedom all solace to man gives!  
 He lives at ease, that freely lives!  
 A noble heart may have none ease,  
 Na ellys nought that may him please,  
 If freedom fail: for free liking  
 Is yearned o'er all other thing.  
 Na he that aye has lived free  
 May not know well the propertye,  
 The anger, na the wretched doom  
 That is coupled to foul thralldom.

The singular advancement and polish of the Scottish phraseology at this period, and its extraordinary coincidence with the most approved standards of composition then recognised south the Trent, have not escaped the wonder and unsatisfied conjecture of our modern antiquaries; and they have been compelled to acknowledge, with ill-dissembled reluctance, that should Thomas of Ercildoun, as Walter Scott strongly contends, be established as the author of the romance of Sir Tristrem, “our ancestors appear to have been indebted to a Scottish poet for the earliest model of a pure English

style." This is assuredly a curious and rather startling supposition ; and it is a matter of regret that the subject does not admit of a more conclusive explanation than it has already received from those who have chronicled the facts. Such a consummation, however, is scarcely within the limits of hope ; unless indeed " true Thomas" himself should be induced to return from his sojourn in " fair Elfland," where in the opinion of the vulgar he now " drees his weird," and make a distinct revelation of the mystery from under the shade of his favorite eildon tree. In the meanwhile Ritson, Pinkerton, and Ellis have each independently indulged in their separate theories, affording elucidations which in their own eyes are nowise deficient in perfection, and which are undoubtedly illustrated by much subtilty and learning. The latter concludes his specimens of the early English poets with the following sensible observations. " It is evident that the unreserved communication between the Scots and English, during the twelfth century, could not fail of greatly increasing among the former the catalogue of their artificial wants ; and that this must augment their vocabulary by a large importation of foreign words. And if, to all the articles of luxury, parade, and magnificence, multiplied as they were by the variations of fashion, we add the terms of chicane, and war, and hunting, for all of which our islanders are indebted to Norman ingenuity, we may perhaps find suf-



ficient grounds to believe that a language very nearly, if not perfectly identical with the English was likely to be formed in the southern provinces of Scotland before the termination of the twelfth century."

But to return from this digression.—Mr. Godwin has enrolled sir John Mandeville among the illustrious spirits whose claims upon our gratitude we have just been attempting to rehearse; and without doubt the good knight is perfectly entitled to the distinction no less from the peculiarities than from the unquestioned merits of his performances. Intimately acquainted with the geographical information of the Mahometans, at that time the exclusive patrons of foreign travel and of scientific adventure, and largely endowed by nature with personal enterprize and curiosity, he determined to survey the Holy Land, and crossed the sea for that purpose "in the yeer of our Lord Jesu Crist 1322." During the course of his rambles he professes to have "seyn and passed thorghe Tartarye, Percye, Ermonye the lytylle and the grete; thorghe Lybye, Caldee, and a grete partie of Ethiope; thorghe Amazoyne, Inde the lesse and the more, a grete partie; and thorghe out many othere iles that ben abouten Inde." He engaged in the service of the reigning sultan of Egypt, whom he attended in his excursions against the Bedouin Arabs, and who sought in vain to confirm him in his permanent employ by the most tempting

inducements in the shape of ambitious nuptials, and courtly preferment. Rejecting the proffered honours, and proceeding onwards in his pilgrimage, he subsequently enlisted himself under the banners of the great khan of Tartary, and, "alongst with four other knights, was his soudyoure fifteen monethes agenst the kyng of Mancy that helde werre agenst him." Finally, having executed divers other wanderings, and encountered additional perils and mischances, he was at length peremptorily admonished to seek repose by the increasing ailments of advanced life, and returned to his native country in 1356, after an absence of as many as thirty-four actively occupied years. He now applied himself to compile a narrative of his "Voiage and Travaille," treating "of the way to Hierusalem, and of the marveyles of Inde;" and when the book had been examined and approved by the pontiff and his council, it was ushered into the world in three different languages—the Latin, the French, and the English.

Whatever sir John actually saw, he seems generally to relate with much fidelity and intelligence; but he professes to have had recourse to the information of others, and to have extracted freely from their journals, and even from their oral communications, a mass of recital which had not chanced to come under his own individual observation. His work, therefore, is a most singular and anomalous produc-

tion, where fact and fable appear linked hand in hand, and where fancy too often guides the pen, and distorts the simplicity and verisimilitude of truth. These circumstances, however, which to us form a ground of criticism and regret, rendered it still more palatable and alluring to the vitiated appetites of his contemporaries. They had been accustomed to the exaggerated manner of the chivalrous romance, and were not likely to listen, with a very satisfied attention, to any adventures which came divested of a similar extravagance and pomp.

His pages, again, operated strongly on the poetic invention of the age, reviving, as it has been remarked, many obsolete fables, and giving the weight of living testimony to those which were new. "He appeared as the Ulysses of modern story, to vouch the truth and verity of the land of enchantment, and to narrate, as what he had seen and heard in the countries where they were reported to have happened, the legends which had hung lightly on the credulous ear."

Meanwhile he atoned for his occasional aberrations towards the imaginative and the marvellous, by contributing not a little to the advancement of science. He abounds in accurate descriptions of the manners and customs of the nations whom he himself had really visited, and personally observed on his journey. He was, besides, the first to assert the spherical form of the earth; and the no less startling possibility

of circumnavigating the globe ; and, above all, he was the father of English enterprise and travel, and the composer of the very earliest original prose volume in the language.

Such were the meliorations which have immortalized the sway of Edward the third and Richard the second, and such a few of the authors who have been denominated the evangelists of our tongue. In the commencement of the former reign, the Latin and the French held both fashion and literature under a thralldom the most despotic. Now the English had assumed the proud aspect of a rival, and had suddenly risen into a popular and tolerably cultivated dialect. At the one period there was scarce any thing that could be called poetry, and not a vestige of prose ; at the other, the language might be correctly said to abound in the vernacular works of fiction, while it was not deficient in the graver lessons of unmetrical wisdom.

The succeeding and consecutive reigns of the fourth, fifth, and sixth Henries were more conspicuous for nothing than for their comparative literary abasement. Whilst the rest of Europe was nobly shaking off the last remnants of ignorance and superstition, like “ dewdrops from the lion’s mane,” the progressive career of British literature was temporarily impeded, and the people nearly thrown back into the darkness from which they had but recently, and most meritoriously, emerged. This distressing event may be entirely imputed to the unsettled

aspect of the times, and to the exasperated factions by which the country was rent asunder during the melancholy strife of the roses: kindred were marshalled against kindred in the struggle; the peaceable and the studious were alike summoned into action; and even those hands which had been consecrated to the pure service of religion, were often defiled by the weapons and the carnage of warfare. Erudition and science were generally treated, as it may be imagined, with total inattention and contempt; and the still small voice of learning, and of intellectual cultivation, was well nigh stifled amid the contentions and the distracting fury of civil discord. Church benefices and scholastic preferment, were currently bartered by the powerful for political and military support; and no degree of imbecility was considered sufficient to incapacitate the creatures of intrigue from holding and exercising the most responsible offices in the hierarchy and the state. This partly accounts for the extreme disrepute in which the labours of the clergy were held by the populace during the whole of the fifteenth century, and may have had its share in contributing to the mighty downfall that awaited their order. Warton has illustrated this topic by quoting several instances of the small remuneration which they commonly received for their professional services: one in particular, occurring at an annual feast held in Abingdon, about 1430, where twelve

priests were paid each only fourpence for singing a dirge, while "the same number of minstrels were rewarded with two shillings and fourpence each, beside diet and horse meat." And he cites another from the Account Book, for the year 1441, of the monastery of Maxtoke near Coventry, by which it appears, that the prior allowed only the moderate sum of sixpence for a sermon to a doctor prædicans : one of those peripatetic dignitaries in theology who went round expounding the word to the different religious houses. But perhaps this trifle was the full value of the doctor's preaching wares, at least if they bore any resemblance to some of our modern trials of patience; or if they may be judged by the other essays which the period in question has handed down to us.

The few literary monuments of the age are sadly disfigured by vulgarity and by tasteless extravagance. The Latin and the Greek were ill understood and worse written by their obscure and barbarous cultivators. Philosophy dwindled into mere jargon, theology into idle cavilling, and alchemy was the only research which the government of Henry the sixth condescended publicly to encourage. The native poets who now flourished fell unspeakably short of their predecessors; though three of them, John the chaplain, Occleve, and Lydgate, assisted considerably to amend and establish our English heroic verse, and, by introducing a more perspicuous diction, and a mode

of phraseology more amplified, added judiciously to the vigour and the harmony of our language. Their chief defects were, a want of judgment, and a prosaic tediousness in detail, which cast a languor over the higher qualities, and the poetical attributes, of their muse.

One decided exception, however, to this general censure exists, and that is from the pen of a royal author, the chivalrous James the first of Scotland. All his works are full of nature, and of the rich colouring of genius; but the poem which he composed during his captivity, under the title of the "Kingis Quair," exhibits an extraordinary combination of simplicity with feeling, and of propriety with ease. A discriminating critic has gone still farther, and not hesitated to assert, that it is no way inferior in point of merit to any similar production of Chaucer; and some of the verses, he continues, "are so elegant and highly finished, that they would not disfigure the compositions of Dryden, Pope, or Gray." They are, indeed, instinct with the resistless witchery of consummate tenderness and fancy, and as congenial to the heart as the dew to the rose, when it descends in silver drops, to renovate the drooping beauties of the queen of flowers.

It would have been ungenerous to omit the mention of this peerless ornament of the age: and we must moreover state, in justice to an era far from abundant, either in the labours or the treasures of intellect, that sundry colleges

were now endowed in both Oxford and Cambridge; that the universities of saint Andrews<sup>f</sup>, and of Glasgow were established; and withal, that the reign of Henry the fifth is the very first in our annals in which English epistolary correspondence became either fashionable or common. "Letters previous to that time," says Mr. Henry Ellis, who has conferred a signal obligation on his country by his two recent publications, "were usually written in French or Latin; and were the productions chiefly of the great and the learned. The letters of learned men were verbose treatises, mostly on express subjects: those of the great, who employed scribes, from their formality frequently resembled legal instruments. We have nothing earlier," he concludes, "than the fifteenth century, which can be called a familiar letter."

Of the last description, however, we possess in the Paston collection, extending as it does over the three subsequent reigns, an extremely instructive and most curious miscellany, revealing at once the obscure questions of state po-

<sup>f</sup> The second charter given to this ancient seminary by its zealous patron, bishop Kennedy, and confirmed at Rome by pope Pius the second, September 13th, 1458, contains the following tolerant clause in regard to the discipline of the members belonging to his newly erected college: "We ordain further, that all the members of the said college live decently, as becomes ecclesiastics; that they do not keep concubines *publicly*; that they be not *common* night walkers or robbers, or *habitually* guilty of other *notorious* crimes; and if any of them is so, (which God forbid,) let him be corrected by his superior; and if he proves incorrigible, let him be deprived by the same superior, and another substituted in his place." We sincerely trust the standard of clerical propriety has been raised in saint Andrews since the above was written.



licy, and elucidating most distinctly the private manners of the age. In them are to be found recorded, with undisguised freedom and candour, the domestic occurrences, and the public enterprises and counsels of various actors and sufferers in the wars of Lancaster and York. We are, as it were, admitted to their intimacy, and made the confidants of their schemes; we become the depositories of the changing minutiae of family conduct and caprice, and learn more from one volume of the peculiar character of the period to which they refer, than a dozen formal histories would ever exhibit by endless pages of eloquence and nicely balanced detail. The style in which they are composed is usually familiar and simple, and such as we may conceive to approach closely to the manner of conversation then in vogue. It shows that the improvements of learning had not been quite thrown away upon the laity, and were finding an access to the camp as well as to the court and the grove.

In truth, the epoch from the accession of Edward the fourth till the demise of Henry the seventh, presents prospects truly cheering when contrasted with the barren dulness which we have been deploring under the auspices of their immediate ancestors. The unfortunate Tiptoft, earl of Worcester, sir John Fortescue, earl Rivers, and others, lent the splendour of their rank, and the encouragement of their example, to assist the reviving activity of letters and

knowledge; and "the countenance of men in their situation," as Walpole has observed, "must have operated more strongly than the attempts of an hundred professors, benedictines, and commentators."

The first named illustrious personage, lord Worcester, resided long at Padua for the sole benefit of study; and on his return enriched the libraries and the information of his country by valuable importations of books and manuscripts from Italy. Besides, he executed several elegant and faithful translations from the Latin; and amongst them the treatises of Cicero de Amicitia, and de Senectute; and so immensely did he outshine his contemporary peers, that Fuller declares, with his wonted pithy quaintness, after mentioning his barbarous and unjustifiable execution, "the axe did then, at one blow, cut off more learning than was in the heads of all the surviving nobility."

The second mentioned worthy, sir John Fortescue, belongs in strict accuracy to the court of Henry the sixth; and was an eminent lawyer, of singular integrity and accomplishments, who successively filled the exalted offices of chief justice, and lord high chancellor of England. He left behind him two treatises, entitled respectively, "De Laudibus Legum Angliæ," and "The Difference between an Absolute and a Limited Monarchy;" both replete with profound researches and constitutional wisdom. The former is written in Latin; but

the latter is composed in English, of uncommon purity and raciness, and will amply reward the perusal of every student of our government, our laws, and our language.

The tragical fortunes of the earl Rivers, imprisoned and murdered in 1483, by Richard the third, then duke of Gloucester, have been related *con amore* by lord Orford, in his Catalogue of Royal and Noble Authors; and we presume we shall best gratify the taste of our readers by extracting a brief summary of his merits from that lively production. "The credit of his sister," says his lordship, "the fair lady Gray, who captivated that monarch of pleasure, Edward the fourth, the countenance and example of his prince, the boisterousness of the times, nothing softened, nothing roughened the mind of this amiable lord, who was as gallant as his luxurious brother-in-law, without his weaknesses; as brave as the heroes of either rose, without their savageness; studious in the intervals of business, and devout, after the manner of those whimsical times, when men challenged others whom they never saw, and went barefoot to visit shrines in countries of which they had scarce a map. In short, lord Antony [Widville, earl Rivers] was, as sir Thomas More says, "*vir, haud facile discernas, manuve aut consilio promptior.*"

But the literature of this crisis lies under much deeper obligations to a humble citizen of London, than to the patronage or cultivation of

the high-born and the wealthy; for, though the invention of printing has been vehemently disputed between the rival cities of Haerlœm and Mentz, and the partisans of their respective inhabitants and protégés, Laurentius Janz Coster and John Guttemberg or Geinsfleisch, there seems to be little uncertainty that William Caxton was the first who introduced the art into England, and established here this invaluable discovery, the nurse and preserver of civil liberty and of religious light.

He appears to have gone abroad in 1464, as agent or factor for the mercers' company, of which he was a freeman; a society of individuals then exercising the functions of most extensive general merchants, and trading in every sort of commodities, not excepting manuscripts and books. About the same period, his manners and capacity pointed him out to his sovereign, Edward the fourth, as a person qualified to conclude a treaty of commerce with the famous Philip duke of Burgundy; and he was accordingly joined in a commission to that effect with a gentleman named Whetehill, under the title of "ambassadors and special deputies." His employment having either terminated, or its necessary labours having been easy, he seems to have devoted much of his leisure to the perusal of chronicles and romances: and during his residence on the continent, not only managed to acquire the newly discovered art of typography, but contrived to

“ordain in print, at his own great charge and expense,” a French work of his own translating, called “The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye, by Raoul le Feure.” This happened A. D. 1471, and three years afterwards he returned to England provided with materials for advancing his favourite craft, and commenced operations in the almonry attached to the abbey of St. Peter’s at Westminster. Thenceforth he continued industriously to prosecute the business which he had embraced; and, as Bagford informs us, both applied his own exertions, though well stricken in years, to the actual working of the press, and contrived to translate for publication “not fewer than five thousand closely printed folio pages.” The exact date of his decease is involved in uncertainty; but it is conjectured to have occurred in 1491, or 1492.

Much obloquy has been heaped on Caxton for principally confining his early publications to fabulous legends and translated romances, when, in the opinion of his censors, he should straightway have disregarded the engrossing taste of his contemporaries, and proceeded boldly to make reprints from the classic authors of antiquity. The absurd ingratitude of this posthumous wisdom must, we think, be sufficiently apparent; not to mention the permanent benefits which accrued to his vernacular tongue from his exclusive employment of it in his volumes; even if he had followed

the system which his discerning critics have sketched out for him, the state of knowledge at his time would have thoroughly precluded his efforts from being attended with any general advantage. It was absolutely necessary that the public mind should be gradually allured into studious energy by stimulants adapted to its weak and still sickly condition; and these he most certainly supplied from his own assiduous pen, and by disseminating the works of Chaucer, and Gower, and other departed ornaments of his country.

Neither, amid the multitude of his translations, did he altogether neglect Roman literature. He presented, in an English dress, the *Æneid* of Virgil, the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, and Cicero on Old Age and on Friendship; and accompanied them by prefaces which, at least, testified his warm admiration and correct estimate of their beauties, and his sincere desire to introduce them into popular regard: yet he seems not to have been in the slightest degree acquainted with them in their primitive garb, but rather to have derived his knowledge through the medium of the French versions which had been lately made, and which comprised the greater portion of the most valuable Latin authors\*.

He likewise added to his other attributes the

\* For a particular account of these works see Warton's *History of English Poetry*, vol. ii. p. 416. et seq. 8vo. 1824.—an elaborate edition of an invaluable classic.

character of an original annalist, by continuing John de Trevisa's translation of the Polychronicon of Ranulph Higden from the year 1357, where that curious work closes, "unto the yere of our Lord 1460, and the fyrst yere of the regne of kyng Edward the fourth." The following observations in his prefix to that venerable folio, display at once the rapid improvements which English composition was beginning to receive, and the more fastidious attention and delicacy which the national appetite now demanded; a subject to which he again recurs at greater length in his interesting proem to the *Æneid*. "I, William Caxton," he says, "a symple persone, have endevoiyred to wryte fyrst over all the sayd book of Polycronycon, and somewhat have chaunged the rude and old English, that is to wete, certain wordes, which in these days be neither usyd ne understanden; and furthermore have put it in enprynte, to the end that it may be had, and the matters therein comprised to be knowen; for the book is general, touching shortly many notable matters; and also am avysed to make another book after this sayd werk, which shall be sette here after the same, and shall have his chapytters and his table aparte: for I dare not presume to sette my book, ne joyne it to his, for dyverse causes; one is, for as moche as I have not, ne can get, no books of auctoryté treatyng of such cronykes, except a lytel book named Fasciculus temporum, and another call-

ed Aureus de universo, in which books I find right lytel matter syth the sayd tyme."

This remarkable deficiency of which he complains in the historical records of his age, and which undoubtedly marks the interval between the accession of Henry the sixth and the death of the usurper Richard, has been ascribed by sir John Fenn, who edited the Paston correspondence, to the novel invention of typography, which, in his estimation, had a decided tendency, at its commencement, to diminish the literary documents peculiar to the epoch in which it arose, by hindering the professional copyists from multiplying their manuscripts, while the press itself was fully occupied with the time-honoured productions that their ancestors had bequeathed, and which were now about to be rewarded with a more imperishable renown. But, though this solution may not be altogether unsupported and visionary, a much better reason is to be discovered in the turbulent character of the proceedings by which this unhappy era was distracted through a state of anarchy the most desolating, and indelibly stained with all the atrocities of mingled ambition and discontent. At a season when every man indiscriminately between the ages of sixteen and sixty was compelled to carry arms, either in domestic or foreign war, and when the noblest blood of England hourly deluged the scaffold or the battle-field, until actually there was not a sufficient number of the gentry in existence



to perform the civil offices, and conduct the necessary business of their counties, it was not probable that much attention would often be withdrawn from their miseries to collect materials for the chronicler, or to preserve curious fragments of intelligence for the gratification of later antiquaries.

Thus have we endeavoured to trace superficially the origin of printing in this country, and to mark its first rude beginnings under the venerable father of our press<sup>a</sup>. Its salutary

<sup>a</sup> Mr. Dibdin, in his enlarged and improved edition of Ames and Herbert's *Typographical Antiquities*, has given the following curious alphabetical list of the books printed by Caxton, with their supposed degrees of rarity, (i. e. the number of copies of each presumed to exist,) six being the highest. To this we have added the prices which such of them brought as were exposed at the celebrated Roxburgh sale in 1812.—a singular monument of the bibliomania which then prevailed in this island.

<i>Name.</i>	<i>Deg. of Rar.</i>	<i>Date.</i>	<i>Price at Roxb. Sale.</i>
Accidence	6	None.	
Æsop	5	1484.	
Arthur, Histories of	6	1485.	
Ballad, Fragment of	6	None.	
Blanchardin and Eg'antine	6	None.	£215. 5s. imperfect.
Boetius	4	None.	
Book of Divers Ghostly Matters	5	None.	
— of Good Manners	4	1487.	
— for Travellers	5	1487.	
Cato Magnus	4	1483.	
— Parvus	5	None.	
Charles the Great	6	1485.	
Chastising of God's Children	4	None.	£140.
Chaucer's Book of Fame	4	None.	
— Canterbury Tales, } first edition	5	None.	
— second edition	4	None.	
— Troilus and Cresside	4	None.	
— Minor works, with } Lydgate's	5	None.	

effects upon our literature it would be perfectly superfluous to detail, since they will suggest

<i>Name.</i>	<i>Deg. of Rar.</i>	<i>Date.</i>	<i>Price at Roxb. Sale.</i>
Chess, Game of	5	1474.	
-----	4	None.	
Chivalry, Fayt of Arms, and	4	1489.	£336.
----- Order of	6	1484.	
Chronicle of England, etc.	3	1480.	
Cordial	4	1480.	
Craft to know well to die	5	1490.	
Curial of Alain Chartier	6	None.	
Dictes of the Philosophers	4	1477.	
De Fide et Cantu, etc.	5	None.	
Directorium Sacerdotum	5	None.	
Doctrinal of Sapience	4	1489.	
Edward the Confessor	—	Qu. ?	
Godfrey of Boulogne	5	1481.	
Golden Legend	4	1483.	£31. imperfect.
Gower's Confessio Amantis	3	1483.	£336.
Horæ	6	None.	
Jason	5	1475.	
Infancia Salvatoris	6	None.	
Katherin of Sienne	4	None.	£95.
Knight of the Tower	4	1484.	
Liber Festivalis	4	1483.	£105.
Life of our Lady	4	None.	£49. imperfect.
----- St. Wenefrid	5	None.	
Lombardy, History of,	—	Qu. ?	
Lucidary	6	None.	
Lyndewood	—	Qu. ?	
Mirror of the World	4	1481.	£351. 15s.
Ovid's Metamorphoses	6	1480.	
Paris and Vienne	6	1485.	
Pilgrimage of the Soul	4	1483.	
Polychronicon	4	1482.	
Proverbs of Pisa	5	1478.	
Reynard the Fox	6	1481.	
Royal Book	4	1484.	
Russel, Oration of,	6	None.	
Siege of Rhodes	6	None.	
Speculum Vitæ Christi	4	None.	£45. imperfect.
Statutes	6	None.	
Troy, Receuil des Histoires	6	None.	£116. 11s. imperfect.
----- Histories of,	5	1471.	£1060. 10s.

themselves, without effort, to every reflecting mind. In the comprehensive language of the Book of Martyrs, “ hereby tongues are known, knowledge groweth, judgment increaseth, books are dispersed, the scripture is read, stories be opened, times compared, truth discerned, falsehood detected, and with finger pointed, and all, as I said, through the benefit of printing.” By the press, the English tongue was completely rescued from the innovations of both ignorance and caprice ; and out of the same source were mainly derived its present stability and form. Our political constitution has long become identified with its unfettered existence and services, and our empire the inviolate asylum of free discussion and liberal opinions ; while it may now be said of literature, as it was of death by the satirist,

— *Æquo pulsat pede pauperum tabernas,  
Regumque tures.*

Caxton was immediately succeeded in his calling by his workmen and pupils, Wynkyn de Worde and Richard Pynson, who continued to prosecute the art with increased embellishment and skill : and so marvellously did it flourish, and spread its influence in every direction, that, before 1585, we find as many as twelve extensive

<i>Name.</i>	<i>Deg. of Rar.</i>	<i>Date.</i>	<i>Price at Roxb. Sale.</i>
Tully of Old Age, etc.	3	1481.	£115.
Virgil's Eneid	4	1490.	
Work of Sapience	4	None.	

provincial presses in active employment within the kingdom. To forward their operations, and to secure them against foreign competition, were matters deemed worthy of a direct legislative interference; and with these views it was enacted, in the twenty-fifth year of Henry the eighth, that the statute of Richard the third, permitting strangers to import printed books for the purpose of sale, should be repealed; and that it should thenceforth be unlawful to dispose of any in this country which had been brought from beyond seas. It moreover appears, from the same enactment, that not only Latin treatises had been introduced from the continent, but also others, "in our maternall English tongue<sup>1</sup>."

The clergy of the church of Rome seem to have been aware, from the very first, of the natural effects which the discovery would exercise upon their temporal influence and authority; and one of them declared, in a sermon which he delivered at Paul's Cross, about the time of which we write, that they must either root out printing, or printing would root out them. Even cardinal Wolsey is supposed by lord Herbert to have been actuated in founding his collegiate institutions by the consideration, that, "since printing could not be put down, it were best to set up learning against learning; and, by introducing able persons to dispute, to

<sup>1</sup> Vid. Pulton's Collection of Sundrie Statutes, p. 543.

suspend the laity betwixt fear and controversies." But, whatever may have been his motives, refinement now began to spread her banner over the land; and we come at length to a period of stronger excitement and deeper interest than any of those through which we have passed in the course of a survey, that, though imperfect, we trust has been neither tedious nor uninteresting—a period, when "the morning of perfect civilization breathes upon us, and the twilight reddens into the lustre of day."

The reign of Henry the eighth was the auspicious commencement of what has been styled with propriety the modern history of our country; and that impetuous ruler is complimented by Erasmus with the most enviable title of being the parent of a golden age. It is yet further intimated by the same accomplished scholar, that learning had now migrated from the luxurious professors of religion, and attached herself to "secular princes and to courtly nobles." To none did she evince a more partial regard than to our singularly gifted and shrewd-minded monarch; and he persevered in rewarding her with a fervency of affection, much more amiable and constant than he ever vouchsafed to the ill-starred partners of his throne. While his elder brother Arthur survived, Henry had been intended, by his father, to become the head of the English church, and his education was more perfect and more strictly watched, that he might be able to fulfil with

credit the pious views of his parent. He was accordingly made a proficient in no less than four different languages—the Latin, French, German, and Spanish; and that taste for letters was thus early excited and fostered which continued to adorn his character throughout his more active years. The truth of this statement does not rest on the slippery authority of courtiers alone; it is confirmed by the reluctant evidence of his inveterate foe, the cardinal de la Pole, who is constrained to acknowledge that he not only liberally rewarded the most scientific among his subjects, but was also confidently resorted to by literary foreigners, as a most munificent patron and correct judge of the arts. He is withal recorded to have composed several original treatises, and, amongst others, a theological argument, entitled *Assertio septem sacramentorum adversus Martyn Lutherum*; a second, *De potestate regia contra Papam*; beside an Introduction to Grammar, a book of Prayers, and an essay, *De justo in Scotos bello*. And it is stated in one of the private epistles from the amiable sage of Rotterdam, that “the erudite stand round the royal table, and, in brief, the company of the palace is such, that there is no academy you would not undervalue in comparison with it.”

Neither must it be concealed to the disadvantage of his favorite, Wolsey, that he also entertained no envious jealousy of superior talent, but, on the contrary, usually selected

its possessors for official preferment; and that his discriminating patronage was most efficaciously instrumental in enlarging and adorning the rising empire of knowledge. He enjoyed one of those original and inventive capacities which seem born to control the feebler spirits that surround them, and to teach mankind the full value of mental energy and power. His magnificent establishments at Oxford, and his native Ipswich, are the noblest monuments that could perpetuate his memory; and ought to make us treat with greater lenity those truly human imperfections, which, as they bedimmed the splendour of his meridian fame, so they embittered the misfortunes of his declining age.

But other causes contributed no less powerfully than either the peculiar character of the sovereign, or the liberal patronage of his minister, to rouse the dormant genius and spirit of the times, and to disenthral the arts and sciences from the leaden despotism of bigotry. The human intellect was no longer content to slumber supinely on its fetters, and to dream that it was free. It now struggled boldly and successfully for an unlimited emancipation, and to obtain a more extended range of observation and thought. The era, in short, of fearless investigation and of discovery had commenced, and the tyranny of papal Rome, deep-rooted as it was, withered into impotence before its conquering advance.

Warton has shrewdly observed, that "the

genius of romance and of popery were the same; and that both were strengthened by the reciprocation of a similar spirit of credulity." Of this the clergy of the present period were sufficiently aware; and they, therefore, propagated the literature, and encouraged the perusal of the narratives, to which chivalry had given birth, that the popular attention might be diverted from theological debate. It would even appear that they carried their point for a season, since we find Roger Ascham declaring, with reprobation, in his *Schoolmaster*, that "he knew the time when God's Bible was banished the court, and *La Morte d'Arthur* received into the prince's chamber." The priesthood had likewise discountenanced the acquisition of both Hebrew and Greek, and whatever contributed to disabuse the inquisitive minds of the laity, or to diminish their veneration for the degrading omnipotence of the pope, and the dazzling mummary of their religious ordinances. The universities and schools, accordingly, were now far from being either laudable on account of their success, or very beneficial in their influence; but they fortunately possessed a trifling hold over the public disposition and taste, and threw no insurmountable impediment in the way of national elevation.

Indeed the unscrupulous despotism of the holy see—with all its grinding machinery of bulls, Peter's pence, dispensations, and delegacies—had long made itself felt and abhorred.



wherever its authority prevailed. In 1527 we find the polished state of Florence earnestly desiring even a German invasion, rather than a continuance of the galling domination under which they had groaned ; and so strongly had indignity inclined them towards the tenets of the Lutheran creed, that the vicegerent of the pontiff, their lord spiritual and temporal, hesitated to trust them with arms against the professors of that fast-spreading heresy. A violent insurrection, as might have been anticipated, was the immediate result ; during which the papal commander was refused admission to the city, and the sanctified name of his master, together with all his busy emissaries, devoted to the most hostile and regardless execration. Nay, but a short while afterwards, Rome herself was sacked and pillaged by the imperial army under the heroic duke de Bourbon ; and the infallible and holy representative of St. Peter, after having sustained an unpitying siege within the castle of St. Angelo, was obliged to capitulate at the mercy of his irreverent opponents.

When such rancorous hatred was thus openly expressed, and such retributive violence unstintingly perpetrated within the very threshold of the once dreaded Vatican, it ceases to be surprising that the same licence should have simultaneously pervaded more distant regions, which were at all events less menacingly obnoxious to penal constraint. “ It broke a talis-

man," says Mr. Turner, "and dissolved a spell, which could never be constructed again. The enchanted giant vanished for ever: and a feeble mortal, dared, insulted, threatened, opposed and endangered, whenever his temporal masters pleased, or could agree, has only been seen in the Vatican ever since."

The English populace received the tidings of the ungracious proceeding which the emperor's general had adopted, with undisguised satisfaction and saucy contempt. They declared, as we are informed by a contemporary chronicler, that "the pope was a ruffian, and unfit for his station, and that as he had begun the mischief he was extremely well served." An expression of feeling at once so decisive and so fearless, affords a sufficient indication of the peculiar temper of the times, and was abundantly conclusive in reference to the quickly-coming fate of the popish system of belief.

In fact, the defection of the English church from that of Rome seems to have long been anticipated even by the catholic hierarchy themselves. It is a curious circumstance, that so early as the year 1253, when pope Innocent the fourth wished to confer the dignity of a canon, in the cathedral church of Lincoln, on one of his nephews, and had issued a bull to his legate to see the appointment carried into effect, the apostolic instrument was rendered null by bishop Greathead, who then presided over the diocese, peremptorily refusing the

slightest obedience to its injunctions, on the ground that the individual recommended was incapable of performing the duties of the pastoral office. At such an instance of honest contumacy, the indignation of the pontiff was aroused to the highest; and he at first bethought himself of inflicting the most summary punishments on his daring opponent, but he was dissuaded from his projects of vengeance by the calmer judgment of his cardinals, who prudently said, "Let us not raise a tumult in the church without necessity, and precipitate that revolt and separation from us, which we know must one day take place." These remarkable expressions occur in the History of Matthew Paris, who himself flourished in the same century that produced the transactions which he has recorded. It also appears from authentic documents, quoted by Mr. Hume, that the measure of throwing off the spiritual allegiance of the church of Rome was actually entertained and discussed by the parliaments of Edward the third. "They speak in plain terms," he says, "of expelling by force the papal authority, and thereby providing a remedy against oppressions which they neither could nor would any longer endure."

If the opinions of Henry and his court, on the same subject, were ever more than outwardly at variance with the boisterous prejudices of his people, his sentiments were soon after brought into unison with theirs, by the

vexatious discussions to which his partiality for Anne Boleyn lent an impassioned excitement<sup>k</sup>. When his mind was thus irritated into hatred and disgust against the possessor of the tiara, it is natural to imagine that he would easily be seduced into the adverse faith, by the persuasions of one with whom he was so entirely transported, as he continued for a fleeting season to be with that accomplished lady. She had early embraced the simple tenets of the reformation during the period of her residence at the court of France, where they appear to have been received with ardent zeal by many of the royal and noble persons who figured

<sup>k</sup> A singular corroboration of Henry's intense anxiety on this head, and of the mental activity and diligence with which he proceeded to the accomplishment of his wishes, is to be found in the Account of his Privy Purse Expences, lately published under the superintendence of a learned antiquarian. In that instructive register there are numerous entries of the gratuities paid to the servants of abbots and priors for bringing books to his majesty, and to divers persons for the removal of boat-loads of volumes from one palace to another, between October 1530 and January 1532, but chiefly early in 1531; "and there can be little doubt," adds the editor, "that they related to the subject which then occupied Henry's mind, his divorce." However completely we may be satisfied of the gross injustice of his majesty's conduct towards his deeply-injured queen, Catharine, and however sincerely we may pity that amiable victim to his passions, yet, when we consider the important results which, if it did not originate, it most indubitably hastened, we can scarcely regret, in the abstract, that such cruelty should have been perpetrated. At the same time, looking to his general conduct throughout the whole of the affair, and to his zeal for the papacy during the first nineteen years of his reign, it is impossible to refuse our concurrence in the remark of Thuanus, that "*Certe in reliqua vita ita se gessit ille rex, ut eum, si æquiores et prudentiores pontifices nactus fuisset, sponte se subjecturum ipsorum potestati fuisse appareret.*" He perhaps thought to the last, with Tony Foster in Kenilworth, that "the Romish was a comfortable faith; since a man had but to follow his thrift in such ways as offered—tell his beads—hear a mass—confess, and be absolved."

most conspicuously within its cultivated circle. The following passage, under the date of December 1522, from the journal of Louisa the mother of Francis the first, and of Margaret queen of Navarre, the mistress and instructress of Anne, when little dreaming of the melancholy elevation to which she was destined, while it clearly indicates the notions that sharp-witted dowager was likely to impress upon her domestics and associates, may be conceived to embody the unvarnished opinions which the more sensible individuals of catholic Europe entertained concerning their monkish oracles. "My son and I," she remarks, "by the grace of the Holy Spirit, began to know the hypocrites, white, black, grey, smoaky, of all colours; from whom may heaven, of its clemency and infinite goodness, defend us! for, if Jesus Christ did not speak falsely, there is not a more dangerous race in all human nature." In a precisely consonant spirit the duke of Suffolk exclaimed, when it was unexpectedly announced at Westminster that the pope had withdrawn the authority which he had delegated to the cardinals Campeggio and Wolsey to dissolve the subsisting marriage between Henry and his queen Catharine, "By the mass! now I see the old saied sawe is true, that there never was a legate or cardinal that did good in England." And even the worthy, yet wary, old recorder of London, when he comes to intimate, in his Annals, that a solemn act of the legislature

was passed in the month of November 1534, by which, to borrow his own quaint phrase, "the pope, with all his college of cardinals, with all their pardons and indulgences, was utterly abolished out of this realm," breaks out into this exulting and heartfelt expression of thankfulness,—“God be everlastingly praised therefore.”

We have selected these remarkable instances to show that our glorious reformation proceeded, not from individual caprice, or from partial clamour, but from an universal conviction pervading and actuating all ranks, which, having its origin in the salutary diffusion of knowledge, cherished, as it were in requital, by its natural and necessary reaction, the intellectual energies into a healthful activity. The mind-improving tendency of the christian dispensation, when purged from the deteriorating abuses of a reprobate hierarchy, was once more made apparent. Many gifted individuals, who had been withdrawn from temporal pursuits by dreams of ascetic perfection, were restored to the career of usefulness for which nature had designed them: those talents which had been lavished on the superstitious observances of bigotry, were applied to undertakings in which society had good cause to rejoice; and, to use the appropriate expression of a neglected poet,

“The soul’s dark cottage, batter’d and decay’d,  
Let in new light through chinks which time had made.”

No circumstance more materially tended to achieve this mighty deliverance from bondage, and to hasten and direct the literary improvement of England at this period, than the recovery and general diffusion of the classic authors of antiquity. They had never been altogether neglected by a few of the learned in every country which could boast of any connection with the once omnipotent mistress of the world; but, even in the cases where they were most fortunate, they were too often perused with a perverse tastelessness and inconsistency, which neither benefited the individuals thus favoured by learning, nor yet attracted the interest of society at large. If one solitary luminary arose, whose studies were more judicious, because his mind was more enlarged, his example only served to make the darkness visible for a time within his own immediate sphere of movement, and his light died away ere it could be communicated abroad.

During the whole of this gloomy era, however, the Latin language was infinitely better preserved than the Greek; and this no doubt originated principally, as Mr. Hallam has supposed, from the continued use of a Latin liturgy by the catholic church. Such portions of Aristotle, and of his countrymen, as were much read, were almost always consulted in the form of Latin versions: and it has even been asserted by Brucker and Buhle, that these were only attained through the circuitous medium of the

Arabic. Still in the dismalest periods a few profound scholars existed, whom we may presume to have been acquainted with the original text; and among the number we would instance Roger Bacon, and Grostete bishop of Lincoln; and subsequently Millyng abbot of Westminster, Robert Flemmyng, and William Gray, advanced by pope Nicholas the fifth to the bishopric of Ely, who form brilliant exceptions to a state of national ignorance but too extensive and lamentable.

It was not, however, till towards the middle of the fourteenth century that the cultivation of classic learning began to extend beyond the cloister, and to employ the devoted inquiry of Petrarch, Boccaccio, and other really discriminating scholars. The labour of discovery, and of accurate transcription, was continued in Italy throughout the whole of the succeeding century; and thither the most enthusiastic of our literati betook themselves, to feast their eyes on the newly regained treasures of Roman learning, and to imbue their minds with Attic elegance and philosophy. Greek was first publicly taught at Oxford, about the year 1490, by William Grocyn, a fellow of New college, who had studied under the most eminent tutors at both Florence and Rome: and about ten or fifteen years later, the grammarian Lilly returned from a protracted residence at the island of Rhodes, and introduced the acquisition of the same language into St. Paul's school, of



which he had been appointed the head-master by its spirited founder dean Colet.

This enterprising prelate had himself visited the continent, and was reckoned one of the most erudite and accomplished dignitaries of his time. He devoted his eloquence to the overthrow of the scholastic theology, and to "the exaltation of the scriptures and Jesus Christ in its room." "He greatly assisted," says archdeacon Wrangham, "to promote the reformation, by successfully attacking the Scots and the Thomists, who had divided between them the christian world ; as well as by detecting the shameful abuses of monasteries, and houses called 'religious,' and pointing out the evils which attended the celibacy of the clergy." Colet had, above all, the honour of being the confidant and coadjutor of Erasmus, whose name must ever be sacred with the admirers of ancient learning, and to whom the British public was then indebted for much valuable instruction.

Erasmus first visited our island in 1497, and established himself at Oxford with the intention of teaching Greek. He soon found, however, that the members of the university were little disposed to extend their knowledge, and were plenteously inspired with that pious abhorrence of innovation and improvement which has too often characterized their proceedings, though not quite so frequently as their maligners would lead us to suppose. Notwithstanding, there-

fore, of the encouragement which he received from a few, more enlightened than their fellows, among the number of whom was the venerable Bernard Gilpin, he soon withdrew from a scene where his labours and his genius were alike depreciated and fruitless. He was again induced to return to England in 1509; and, through the patronage of the chancellor, sir Thomas More, and Fischer bishop of Rochester, he was appointed Margaret professor of divinity, and lecturer on Greek literature, at Cambridge. Here his success was scarcely more gratifying than it had been at the sister university; and he was necessitated to retire to the Netherlands in 1514. But though his plans of Greek education failed for the present in the seats of learning, they were soon afterwards revived by others with the most triumphant results, and the students of that delightful language became immediately as numerous as they were respectable and unwearied.

No less distinguished than Erasmus was his illustrious friend sir Thomas More, who not only promoted the study of the classics by his example and his eloquence, but was also the first eminent writer, after the revival of letters, who cultivated his native language, and employed it in his works. His English style is remarkable for its artful construction and Latin inversions; and combines much simplicity, and occasional rudeness of expression, with a certain air of pedantry and of laborious stateliness.

As our selections, however, commence with the reign of Henry the eighth, we shall take another opportunity of adverting to his writings; and the same reason will prevent us from doing more at present than merely mentioning the names of such contemporary English authors as Leland, Fischer, Hall, Latimer, etc.

The perusal of the classics, as it was now conducted, introduced a purer taste and a more philosophical spirit into our literature. It gave the coup de grace to the wire-drawn trifling of scholastic debate, and brought its soporific dullness and jargon into the contempt which they deserved. The New Testament was again examined in its original simplicity and clearness; and the sacred scriptures were made to predominate over the fallacious compendiums of the schoolmen<sup>1</sup>. As old Tyndale expressed it,

<sup>1</sup> These contentious worthies have been admirably characterised by lord Bacon in the following passage of his *Treatise on the Advancement of Learning*. "Surely, like as many substances in nature, which are solid, do putrify and corrupt into worms, so it is the property of good and sound knowledge to putrify and dissolve into a number of subtile, idle, unwholesome, and, as I may term them, vermiculate questions, which have indeed a kind of quickness, and life of spirit, but no soundness of matter, or goodness of quality. This kind of degenerate learning did chiefly reign amongst the schoolmen, who, having sharp and strong wits, and abundance of leisure, and small variety of reading, (but their wits being shut up in the cells of a few authors, chiefly Aristotle their dictator, as their persons were shut up in the cells of monasteries and colleges,) and knowing little history, either of nature or time, did, out of no great quantity of matter, and infinite agitation of wit, spin out unto us those laborious webs of learning which are extant in their books. For the wit and mind of man, if it work upon matter, which is the contemplation of the creatures of God, worketh according to the stuff, and is limited thereby; but if it work upon itself, as the spider worketh his web, then it is endless, and brings forth indeed cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no

“the fleshly-minded hypocrites had lost their juggling terms, wherewith they imposed on, and misled, the people.”

It is stated, however, by Warton, and not to be disputed, that the culture of new languages, by introducing a novel course of study, “gave a temporary check to vernacular composition.” But this was far more than counterbalanced by its subsequent utility, and by the fact that it led even the English to be investigated with more grammatical precision. We are told that dean Colet, “with a view to adorn and improve the style of his discourses, and to acquire the graces of an elegant preacher, employed much time in reading Gower, Chaucer, and Lydgate, and other English poets, whose compositions had embellished the popular diction;” and we may fairly presume, that he was not singular in adopting this judicious system. Lord Bacon, indeed, declares that the “affectionate study of eloquence, and ‘copia’ of speech, which then began to flourish, grew speedily to an excess; for men began to hunt more after words than matter, and more after the choiceness of phrase, and the round and clean composition of the sentence, and the sweet falling of the clauses, and the varying and illustration of their works with tropes and figures, than after the weight of matter, worth of subject, soundness of argu-

substance or profit.” See vol. ii. p. 38. et seq. of the beautiful edition of Bacon's Works now in the course of publication under the learned supervision of Basil Montagu, esq.

ment, life of invention, or depth of judgment." But this censure applies principally to the Latin compositions of the age, in which strength was sacrificed in numerous instances to delicacy and polish, and originality to borrowed graces and an imitative copiousness of expression. The English prose style then in use has been described by Dr. Henry with tolerable accuracy and neatness. "The language of the period," he says, "was unpolished and oral; its character is rude simplicity, neither aspiring to elegance nor solicitous of ease, but written as it was spoken, without regard to selection or arrangement. Reduced to modern orthography, it is only distinguishable from the common colloquial discourse of the present period, by a certain rust of antiquity, by phrases that are abrogated, or words that are either effaced or altered. These, however, are not numerous; and we may conclude, from the compositions of the learned, that the language of the people differed little from the present, unless in pronunciation, which, to judge from orthography, was harsh, and such as would now be denominated provincial and vulgar."

The inconsistent cruelty of Henry the eighth towards the conclusion of his reign, when reformers and Romanists were indiscriminately sacrificed to his fury, the state of anarchy to which the kingdom was in consequence reduced, and the minority of Edward the sixth his successor on the throne, all conspired to

impede the advancing current of knowledge. Our language was, it is true, additionally familiarised and fixed by the translation of the Bible that was now admitted into the churches, after the late changeable monarch had compelled a temporary restriction of its use<sup>m</sup>; and we have Roger Ascham's assertion, that the peerage of England was never more lettered than at present; but an unprofitable spirit of controversy had enthralled the affections of the

<sup>m</sup> The sacred volume had long been circulated in numerous detached and unauthorised versions by Tyndale, Joye, etc. when, in 1535, Myles Coverdale's complete translation was published, and shortly afterwards an injunction was issued, emanating directly from Henry, that the parson or proprietary of every parish church within the realm should "provide a book of the whole Bible, both in Latin and also in English, and lay the same in the quire for every man that will to loke and reade thereon: and shall discourage no man from the readinge any parte of the Bible, either in Latin or English, but rather comfort, exhort, and admonish every man to read the same as the very word of God, and the spiritual foode of manne's soul, whereby they may the better know their duties to God, to their soveraigne lord the king, and their neighbour," etc. The same injunction was repeated in the month of May 1540, and certain penalties annexed in the case of non-observance: and again a brief of similar import was issued in 1541. These rescripts, however, seem seldom to have met with a very punctual fulfilment from the parties to whom they were addressed; and in the year 1542, on the representations of the papists, a contrary tone was assumed by the executive, and a statute was promulgated, forbidding the use of the English Bible to the commons of the land, and restricting the privilege to the secret devotions of the higher classes, and their immediate dependents. It was permitted to every nobleman and gentleman, being a householder, "to read, or cause to be read, by any of his familie servants in his house, orchardes, or garden, and to his own familie, any text of the Bible or New Testament; and also every merchantman, being a householder, might read to himself privately the Bible:" but to women, "except noblewomen and gentlewomen," and to all of inferior degree, such as yeomen, prentices, and labourers, the indulgence was expressly prohibited, "upon paine of one month's imprisonment." This enactment, however, was repealed in the first parliament of Edward the sixth; and every church was of new commanded to be provided with an English Bible for the general convenienc of the parishioners.

learned, and seduced them, from their better studies, among its mischievous obliquities. The pens of many were employed in transmuting into barbarous verse the Book of Kings, the Acts of the Apostles, and other portions of sacred writ, similarly intractable and uninviting to the embellishments of the muse. The rewards of genius were, at the same time, appropriated by the greedy satellites of power; and, in the scramble for the revenues of the clergy, their literary treasures were forgotten. The nobles, and those who possessed the power to control the evil, were much more alert to

“ Beg a cast abbey in the church’s wane,”

than to preserve and hand down the numerous relics of its studies. Even the poor scholars at the universities were deprived of their exhibitions; and academical degrees were abolished as antichristian. “ Call you this the gospel,” asks a spirited writer of the age, “ when men seek onlie to provide for their own bellies, and care not a groate though their soules go to hell.”

Disgust at such gross proceedings facilitated the reaction in favor of popery which occurred in the time of Mary, to whom the unfeminine epithet of “ the bloody ” has too justly been applied. Under the shocking system of government which she encouraged, erudition, as may well be conceived, rather retrograded than advanced; and, though her reign was adorned by many names which should have illustrated

a happier era, it must ever be considered as a blot in the literary annals of England. The most pleasing circumstance connected with it was the briefness of its duration : yet the late Mr. Gifford has not scrupled to argue, in his *Memoirs of Ben Jonson*, that the fluctuating state of religion in this, and the bypast reigns, inasmuch as it interested the hopes and fears of the nation in an extraordinary degree, both “invigorated the fancy, and improved the understanding, by making a certain portion of literature necessary to those who contended on either side of this important question.” The intellectual ferment which had arisen, however modified and repressed, was indisputably more beneficial than the languid ignorance of popery; but this is all, we imagine, that the greatest leniency can admit, and it affords no excuse for the intolerance of this morose and jealous queen, and the priest-ridden devotees to whom she had intrusted the reins of power. They placed the freedom of thinking under a degree of embarrassment and constraint to which the records of successful oppression can hardly supply an adequate parallel; and they left no measure unattempted to annihilate the liberal opinions which had been implanted in the affections and the reason of the people.

Their chief demerits, however, were fortunately obviated under the milder sway of Elizabeth, when the best advantages of the reformation began to be more fully displayed.



Hers was in truth an age to which we must ever refer with delight as one of the brightest and most pregnant in the literary history of our land. It is redolent of a cluster of names on which we still hang with undiminished rapture, and which are "familiar in our mouths as household words"—it reminds us of the Shakespeares, the Sidneys, and the Raleighs. To their writings immortality has affixed the impress with which genius loves to be rewarded, and their memories are embalmed in the recollection of a whole world of admirers. "They seem proof," as it has been charmingly remarked in the *Sketch-book*, "against the mutability of language, because they have rooted themselves in the unchanging principles of human nature. They are like gigantic trees that we sometimes see on the banks of a stream; which, by their vast and deep roots, penetrating through the mere surface, and laying hold on the very foundations of the earth, preserve the soil around them from being swept away by the ever-flowing current, and hold up many a neighbouring plant, and, perhaps, worthless weed, to perpetuity."

Nevertheless the period which gave them birth, delightful and refreshing as it may seem, has not been suffered to pass in review without severe critical reprehension. The historian of our poetry deplores the precisian cant of the people, the false conclusions to which the study of the New Testament gave birth amongst the

ignorant, the Calvinistic discipline and prejudices of the restored members of the reformed clergy, and the decline of Latin composition and of classic literature throughout the realm. His observations principally refer to the influence of these circumstances on the products of imagination and romantic minstrelsy, and we humbly conceive are not distinguished by his wonted correctness and discernment. His abhorrence of every thing approximating to puritanism seems to have warped his better judgment, and to have induced him to stretch his inference beyond the warranty of facts. It certainly does appear that, about the middle of this reign, the alumni of the universities were very deficient indeed in respect of scholastic acquisitions: but yet it is not a little singular that we find no reciprocal ignorance pervading society at large. On the contrary, we are told of ladies who were thoroughly initiated in the mysteries of Plato; and that, for example, Elizabeth herself conversed in Greek with her tutor, "frequently, willingly, and moderately well"<sup>n</sup> and we know that the highest offices

<sup>n</sup> The following extracts from Roger Ascham's Latin letters, written in 1550, to his friend John Sturmius, rector of the protestant university at Strasburgh, will at once give an idea of Elizabeth's proficiency in literature, and of the knowledge which it was expected a princess of finished education should possess. "The lady Elizabeth," says Ascham, "has accomplished her sixteenth year: . . . no apprehension can be quicker than hers, no memory more retentive. French and Italian she speaks like English; Latin with fluency, propriety, and judgment: she also spoke Greek with me, frequently, willingly, and moderately well. Nothing can be more elegant than her handwriting, whether in the Greek or Roman character. In music

in the state were laid open to learning and its patrons; and that the cabinet boasted of a Burleigh, a Smith, a Davison, and a Sackville

“ Whose learned muse hath writ her own record  
In golden verse, worthy immortal fame.”

It may be cited, as a further corroboration of the present refinement of the higher orders, and those breathing the same atmosphere, that Puttenham enjoins the poet who wishes to attain a correct style, to take as the model of his language, “ the usuall speach of the court, and that of London ” and the adjacent shires; for “ herein,” he adds, “ we are already ruled by the English dictionaries, and other books written by learned men.”

Meanwhile the pageantry and splendour which surrounded our monarchy at this Augustan era, more than counteracted any bad effects that

she is very skilful, but does not greatly delight. . . . She read with me almost the whole of Cicero, and a great part of Livy. . . . The beginning of the day was always devoted by her to the New Testament in Greek, after which she read select orations of Isocrates and the tragedies of Sophocles. . . . For her religious instruction, she drew first from the fountains of scripture; and afterwards from St. Cyprian, the Common-places of Melancthon, and similar works which convey pure doctrine in elegant language.” In another epistle, he further informs his correspondent, that “ the lady Elizabeth and I are reading together in Greek the orations of Æschines and Demosthenes. She reads before me, and at first sight she so learnedly comprehends not only the idiom of the language and the meaning of the orator, but the whole grounds of contention, the decrees of the people, and the customs and manners of the Athenians, as you would greatly wonder to hear.” In spite of all her accomplishments, however, we are far from being idolizers of the maiden queen. Sir Walter Scott has described her as having “ the heart of a woman, with the head of a man to control its follies:” but her greatest admirers must confess that the latter often nodded at its post, and neglected to discharge the duties of its momentous office.


might have resulted to the lighter creations of genius and fiction, from the abrogation of the institutions and the customs of the middle ages, and the spreading disbelief in their traditions and superstitious fancies. Nay, as these remnants of chivalry and romance had not passed from recollection, and still found admirers and champions in such adventurous spirits as sir Harry Lee°, they were neither less available to the poet than at an earlier day, nor less serviceable to his purposes that they had ceased to be regarded as true. If the reign of Edward the sixth has to answer for much worthless doggerel, the age of Elizabeth produced the magnificent and teeming visions of Spenser, which are as picturesque and as luxuriant as the wildest imagination could desire.

It is a gross mistake to conceive that a rude age is most favourable to the developement of poetical capacity. Though fiction be unquestionably the offspring of ignorance and credulity, she is modelled by art and civilization into consistency and elegance. Her first un-

° This noble, though somewhat Quixotic, old cavalier assumed to himself the title of the queen's own champion and knight, and made a vow to appear completely armed in the tilt-yard, till disabled by age, on every anniversary of her accession to the throne. He was joined by twenty-five of the most distinguished courtiers of the time, who formed themselves into a society, known by the appellation of the Knights-Tilters, and met annually to perform the exercises peculiar to their adopted vocation. In the number of these gallants was enrolled the name of the lord-chancellor Bromley. Let the reader figure the earl of Eldon, or lord Lyndhurst, entering the lists accoutred cap-à-pié, and breaking a lance with some martial brother of the long robe.

taught beginnings were necessarily crude and imperfect, blending the extravagant with the simple, and the sober wisdom of experience with the wayward caprices of fancy. The number of subjects on which she had to work were essentially limited, and very indifferently comprehended; for observation had not fully revealed her exhaustless storehouse of knowledge, and phantasy was permitted to run her eccentric career unchecked by the congruities which critical study suggests.

Notwithstanding that the fire of genius might be brilliant and vigorous, it was only to certain objects that it could apply itself with effect. It could merely throw its glories around whatever presented itself immediately to the senses, or appealed directly to the feelings and excited enthusiasm of the heart. The charms of external nature, decked in all her varieties of allurements, might often be vividly conceived and most glowingly depicted. The flood, the field, the mountain, and the valley, could scarcely fail to awaken sensibilities in the rudest, which would readily clothe themselves in picturesque and descriptive language: but of nearly every thing that relates to the springs of human action and thought, of the intricate workings of our intellectual mechanism, and of a chastened yet artful imitation of nature, the writers of a barbarous age must have been comparatively ignorant. Exceptions may perchance be found; and the names of Homer and Chaucer



occur on the instant to the memory. Still these wonder-working ancients stand "themselves alone," and we are left to regard them as privileged and unaccountable spirits who are allowed to "o'erleap the bounds of space and time," and fairly to set all rules and speculations at defiance.

It is not till after he has been blessed with a high degree of civilization that man begins to turn his attention inwards, and to analyse, with care and circumspection, the complicated emotions which actuate his conduct. It has been excellently remarked, that "the most simple ideas are usually those which occur the last." Uncultivated minds are intensely attracted by gigantic projects and monstrous creations, and by the glare of artificial and meretricious splendour. They are prone to diverge, from what is immediately before them, to some combination alike unprecedented and remote; and it is only when they have exhausted their vulgar curiosity, and their intellects have been stimulated and refined by a course of liberal education, that they return to the point from which they ought to have set out—to studies of a more simple and homebred description.

This crisis was just commencing in Britain at the epoch of which we write. The people still retained the impression of wild beliefs, and Gothic mythology, harmonized, as Warton has expressed it, into "a sort of civilised superstition," by a more enlarged sphere of ex-

perience and philosophical thought. And at the same time that the most picturesque incidents were selected from the ample chronicles of romance, under the guidance of the critical canons of true poesy, as the themes of the muse, graver heads were busily employed in furnishing landmarks to knowledge, and in extending the discoveries and achievements of science. "The English mind," says Mr. Campbell, "put forth its energies in every direction, exalted by a purer religion, and enlarged by new views of truth. This was an age of loyalty, adventure, and generous emulation. The chivalrous character was softened by intellectual pursuits, while the genius of chivalry itself still lingered, as if unwilling to depart, and paid his last homage to a warlike and female reign. A degree of romantic fancy remained in the manners and superstitions of the people; and allegory might be said to parade the streets in their public pageants and festivities. Quaint and pedantic as those allegorical exhibitions might often be, they were nevertheless more expressive of erudition, ingenuity, and moral meaning, than they had been in former times. The philosophy of the highest minds still partook of a visionary character. A poetical spirit infused itself into the practical heroism of the age; and some of the worthies of that period seem less like ordinary men, than like beings called forth out of fiction, and arrayed in the brightness of her dreams.

They had 'high thoughts seated in a heart of courtesy.'"


While the germs of song, therefore, were scattered abroad with the profusion of autumnal leaves, the English prose works of this era were unprecedently abundant, and as striking as they were numerous for their peculiarities and value. They are thronged with elaborate learning, and with the emanations of genius; at the same time that the province of the judgment is not forgotten in their appeals to the fancy and the heart. Not unfrequently, however, we are offended and cloyed in perusing them, by those Italian conceits which were introduced into our poetry, together with many fascinating improvements, by the earl of Surrey and sir Thomas Wyatt the elder. They force a simile through every distortion which exuberant imaginations supplied; and seek that admiration by quaint ingenuity, which would have been spontaneously conceded to natural feeling, ungarnished by affectation and recondite oddities of language. This incongruous rodomontade was even reduced into something like a system, and procured much transient applause to its eccentric cultivator, John Lilly. Under the singular name of Euphuisme, it infected the conversation of the fashionable and the courtly, and extended its evil presence to many deservedly popular productions. It has been rendered familiar to modern ears by the accurate imitation of its grotesqueness, which sir



Walter Scott has afforded in the dialogue of the gallant sir Piercie Shafton in the Monastery.

But a creation so unnatural could not be enduring in its influence; and we find, accordingly, that it soon yielded to a chaster manner and taste. In fact the abuses to which we have alluded did not escape contemporary censure. They are severely handled by Dr. Thomas Wilson, in a treatise on rhetoric which he published about the year 1553. He is particularly wroth against two prevalent impurities of style—an excess of alliteration, and the affectation of some in ending all their sentences alike, “making their talk,” as he describes it, “rather to appear rymed metre than to seme plaine speache:” and he instances the example of a preacher, to whom he once listened, who had not a dozen sentences in his sermon that did not terminate in this kind of jingle.

The following passage of Wilson’s volume affords a favorable specimen of his judgment, and gives an entertaining picture of the literary foibles by which many of his countrymen were then characterised. “Among other lessons,” he says, “this should first be learned, that we never affect any straunge ink-horne termes, but to speak as is commonly received: neither seeking to be over fine, nor living over carelesse, using our speache as moste men do, and ordering our wittes as the fewest have done. Some seecke so farre for outlandishe English, that they forget altogether their



mother's language. And I dare sweare this, if some of their mothers were alive, they were not able to tell what they saie; and yet these fine Englishe clerkes will saie they speake in their mother tongue, if a man should charge them for counterfeiting the kinges Englishe. Some farre journied gentlemen at their returne home, like as they love to go in forrein apparel, so they will powder their talke with over-sea language. He that cometh lately out of Fraunce will talke French-Englishe, and never blushe at the matter. Another choppes in with Englishe Italianated, and applieth the Italian phrase to our Englishe speakyng: the which is, as if an oratour that professeth to utter his mynde in plaine Latine, would needes speake poetrie, and farre fetched colours of straunge antiquitie. The lawyer will store his stomacke with the prating of pedlers. The auditour in makyng his accompt and rekenyng, cometh in with sise sould, and cater de-aere, [six sous, quatre deniers,] for vj. s. and iiij. d. The fine courtier will talke nothyng but Chaucer. The misticall wisemen, and poeticall clerkes, will speake nothyng but quainte proverbes, and blinde allegories; delighthyng muche in their owne darknesse, especially when none can tell what they do saie. The unlearned or folishe phantasticall, that smelle but of learnyng, (such fellowes as have seen learned men in their daies,) will so Latine their tongues, that the simple cannot but wonder at

their talke, and thinke surely they speake by some revelacion. I knowe them that thinke rhetorike to stand wholie upon darke wordes; and he that can catche an inke-horne terme by the taile, him they count to be a fine Englishman, and a good rhetorician."

The shrewd, manly genius of the nation, however, was infinitely superior to the sickening artifices of those misjudging individuals whom a love of singularity led astray. In proof of this, we have only to refer to such compositions as the Defence of Poesy, one of the sweetest tributes ever offered to the allurements of the muse. There the tinsel of meretricious ornament is nowhere to be found, there is no "playing with words and idle similies;" but an originality and a raciness, to which few modern compositions have attained, are conspicuous throughout the whole. We may point also to the oracular pages of that master genius lord Bacon, in which the noblest counsels, and the most enduring conceptions, are clothed in a majesty of diction as appropriate as it is imposing—in a style "expressing volumes in a sentenice, or amplifying a single thought into pages of rich, glowing, and delightful eloquence." The hapless lord Surrey, and his school, had long previously thrown aside the uneasy trammels of rhyme, and produced blank verse which has all the harmony of a copious and established dialect. If a little stiffness and indiscretion, in truth, be overlooked in the

productions of our elder classics, there is no other point in which they may not be compared with the writings of the present time. They have a mode of expression equally perspicuous, and the same facility of phrase; while they surpass us, we think, in a certain freshness and graphic luxuriance of manner.

To the sixteenth century belongs the merit of these striking improvements in English composition. Sir Thomas More has already been mentioned as the first writer of eminence after the revival of letters, who broke through the prejudices of the learned in favor of the Latin, and reflected a lustre on the popular language by adopting it in his productions. Next to him in point of desert, and little removed from him in regard to time, the name of the renowned Roger Ascham may be adduced as having followed the example of the chancellor, by employing his mother tongue in a small treatise called *Toxophilus*, published in 1544, and dedicated to Henry the eighth. Yet so diffident was he of its reception in its unauthorized garb, that he thought it necessary to preface this attempt by a vindication of his conduct in departing from the customary and adopted language of other scholars. A volume from which, in a former page, we have made a liberal extract, the *Arte of Rhetorique sette forth in Englishe* by Thomas Wilson, in 1553, with the express view of giving rules for composing in his native language, proves that, in the interval since the

appearance of the *Toxophilus*, many prejudices had been removed, and much study attracted to the subject. His book, however, since its design was to enlighten the vulgar, was considered by the papists as scarcely less heretical in its tendency than Tyndale's translation of the Bible, and the author was, accordingly, imprisoned in Italy, whither he had gone on a journey of pleasure or business in 1558, and had a narrow escape, as he tells us, from the indignation of the college of cardinals. Several elementary works of the same description were given to the public shortly afterwards; especially one, in 1555, by Richard Sherry, school-master of Magdalen college, Oxford; another in 1580 by a person named William Bullokar; and a third by Richard Mulcaster in 1582. With these may be conjoined Puttenham's *Arte of Englishe Poesy*, a methodical discourse on our versification and its votaries, published in 1589. It is tolerably exempt from the puerilities, and besetting pedantry of phrase, with which the generality of our didactic compositions were then more or less chargeable; and, taken in connection with the writings to which we have just been adverting, denotes the anxiety and favor with which the native dialect was now regarded.

A class of authors, very different from the preceding, and teaching philosophy by example, rendered services to our prose learning, at this juncture, which must not be overlooked,

and should have been earlier commemorated. We refer to the gossiping compilers of our ancient chronicles, which, from the recent interest of their subjects, and the circumstantial minuteness of their narratives, soon established themselves throughout the land as the favorite manuals of the people. We find many allusions to their celebrity in the ephemeral productions of the day ; and from them, and from the translations of the Italian novelists which now began to appear, Shakespeare, and his fellow-labourers in the same vineyard, drew the plots, with little alteration, of nearly all their dramatic performances. Archbishop Parker, likewise, encouraged the efforts of these industrious memorialists with the whole influence belonging to his station ; and not only devoted his own leisure to the study of English antiquities, but left evidences of his diligence in editions of four of our monkish historians.

To us our venerable annalists are fraught with additional importance. They present general sketches of society, and vivid pictures of manners, which none, save the pen of an observant spectator, could have traced or filled up. And, if they sometimes tamper with our patience by their unnecessary prolixness in detail, and offer violence to our reason by inserting many marvellous legends, they invariably restore us to good humour by the guileless simplicity and candour in which their narratives are couched. They have been happily com-

pared, by a sensible critic in the reign of James the sixth<sup>p</sup>, to "some huge disproportionable temple, whose architect was not his art's master, but in which, store of rich marble, and many most goodly statues, columns, arks, and antique pieces, recovered from out of innumerable ruins, are here and there, in greater number than commendable order, erected, with no dispraise to their excellency, however they were not happy in their restorer."

Lastly, though it is without doubt the most important device of the times, we are indebted to this reign for the invention of newspapers, the least dispensable requisite of modern luxury and intelligence. They were introduced by the administration of Burleigh, for the purpose of alleviating public anxiety regarding the progress and result of the dreaded armada; and the first periodical of the kind appeared in the month of April 1588<sup>q</sup>, under the designation of *The English Mercury*. It is conjectured, from a remaining number, to have been a daily publication, and was similar in most respects to the present *London Gazette*. Antecedently, the government of Elizabeth had been wont to issue short printed addresses, explanatory of any political measures to which

<sup>p</sup> Edmund Bolton. See his *Hypercritica*; or a rule of judgment for writing or reading our Histories, etc. p. 220; appended to *Nicolai Triveti Animalium Continuatio*, published by the Rev. Anthony Hall, Oxford, 1722.

<sup>q</sup> The Spanish armament did not arrive in the Channel till the nineteenth July of the same year.

they might wish to secure the concurrence of the people : and, as for matters of lesser moment, persons of rank who happened to be stationed at a distance from the metropolis were under the necessity of either keeping secretaries resident in the vicinity of the court, or of employing correspondents, who seem to have plied a regular trade in communicating occurrences, rumours, and scandal.

From the point to which we have now reached, the literary interests of our country have proceeded onwards in their course of improvement with few impediments and mischances. We may find them neglected, for a time, amid the strife of contending factions, or deteriorated by the influence of an unnational court ; but we see them again coming under notice with acquired importance and fresh charms, and ultimately flourishing around us in the most gratifying luxuriance. Within our own days we have beheld every department of the belles lettres yielding forth its share of elegance, and paying its willing tribute to the cause of learning and of truth : and, above all, we have witnessed the great magician of the north advancing with the mastery of a conqueror over the whole empire of fancy, and stripping it of whatever could lend interest, or add splendour, to his triumphs.















